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OLD † QUARRY.

OLD + QUARRY.

A Nobel.

BY

GERALD GRANT,

AUTHOR OF "COMING HOME TO ROOST."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON:

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OLD + QUARRY.

CHAPTER I.

BADESTONE had its Esplanade, and the Esplanade had its band ; what indeed would an Esplanade be without its band ? A brass band the Esplanade had, and every morning it played, and all Badestone turned out to hear it. How vigorously, how indefatigably did it play to be sure, and always the same airs, always the same dances, valse and polka and opera ; all the gayest, most inspiriting music, as if life were the very merriest, most amusing thing going, and there were no such things as pain or sorrow, or partings, or death ; and if there were, who cared for them ? Valse and polka and opera tune and the merry-go-round—of the world turning on its own axle, keeping time to the music. Life the merriest thing going ! Well ! so it may appear to that young lady with the rosy cheeks and loose flowing hair—she has very nice long hair and likes to show it—with the bounding step and bright coquettish eyes—so it may appear to her now ; for, as we have said, she is so very young. Pass

on, then, Bright Eyes, and laugh and dance and take life as a bright midsummer holiday so long as you can. After the holidays, however bright, come partings and tears, pale cheeks and swollen lids, and heartsickness, as you yourself know well enough, for pardon me for saying it, you still come under the category of Byron's young ladies, who "smell of bread and butter," for all your airs and graces and evident consciousness of being a grown-up young lady. No doubt you think that the drudgery of school life over, tears and partings and heartsickness—those were disagreeable things—are for ever over too. Who cries in the holidays? and life must henceforth be one long holiday for you. Quite a natural view of life at your age. We thought the same in our teens. So pass on and enjoy your holidays whilst you may!

And Miss Bright Eyes passes on accordingly, right on in front of the band, which is playing valse and polka and opera tune, just the music for her! And behind her, close behind her, comes a Bath chair, and in it a red, bloated, distorted form, the victim of paralysis—life in death! And beside him—her dull eyes on his face, her thin nervous hand on his shoulder—walks a woman—anxious, careworn, sallow-faced, faded—oh! how faded!—the victim of devotion. People looking after them say—"There goes the paralytic and his daughter"—and saying it they sigh—for him or for her? Death in life or life in death—which is the sadder of the two? And still the band plays on, valse and polka and opera, and a

great india-rubber ball flung at a venture, goes bounding and rolling in between the legs of the players, and a whole troop of children, with a whoop and shout, go bounding and rolling in after it. "I've got it! I've got it!" Don't be so sure of that, little one; the ball thrown at a venture is not so easily reclaimed. If it now constitutes your greatest earthly treasure, why cast it from you to get soiled and knocked about by the vulgar crowd? Why not keep it safe at home, play with it on the nice soft carpet, and then lock it away in the toy cupboard? Why not? You could not answer that question, little one, nor can your elders either. How few of us keep the heart's best treasures safe and pure at home, hidden from the gaze of the vulgar! How many of us play like thoughtless children with our best, our most sacred feelings, flinging them out upon the world to be soiled and knocked about by the vulgar, jeering crowd.

"I've got it!" Not a bit of it, youngster; for the big fellow with the red face and twinkling eye, who's blowing away for his life, and seems to have a turn for mischief, has given it a kick, and away it goes once more, this time between the legs of the promenaders, on and on, till it rolls under the wheels of another Bath chair, not the one we have already mentioned, that is quite out of sight, but of another; and from amid the cushions piled soft and high, the victim of consumption takes her last look at life: meekly, patiently, resignedly; it is so easy for the young to die, and she is very young, as young

perhaps as Miss Bright Eyes there, who is flirting away so desperately with the lanky officer in the bright new uniform, and with the incipient moustache; and as the two girls meet just opposite the band, the girl in the Bath chair nods and smiles—so faintly, so faintly. Perhaps they were schoolfellows those two, and laughed and played together. Could the great solemn eyes have ever laughed, or the pallid shrunken lips drawn so tightly away from the parched gums? Could those long wasted fingers, crossed, as if already in the repose of death, ever have been busy or mischievous, or have swung a parasol as coquettishly as Miss Bright Eyes yonder? Valse and polka and opera, flying feet and dragging wheels, and yet the latter win the race, and long before the others reach the goal!

Striding along, at what seemed a leisurely pace enough, but which far out-distanced that of every other promenader, came a tall erect figure, head and shoulders thrown back, nostril slightly dilated, brow heavy and frowning; and eyes sent straight before him from under their drooping lids; a careless nod or bow to those who immediately crossed his path; a superb overlooking of those who did not, and he passed on; looks of all kinds—curious, indifferent, admiring, interested—following him as he went. He might overlook nine-tenths of the world from his enviable height, but it was not likely that a man standing six feet in his shoes, with that soldierly bearing and eagle glance, could pass unnoticed in his turn. Along the Esplanade

he strode, out of sight of its promenaders, out of sound of its band, along the cliff, till a small white cottage was reached. In that cottage lodged the little London workwoman whom he had not seen for some days, but knowing her under Miss Graves's care, his mind had been tolerably at ease concerning her.

She welcomed him with the brightening look that hails a friend. Not attempting to answer his questions, she overwhelmed him with her own. She was so much better—could she not soon be going back to the drunken father and idiot brother—to the stitching and want and starvation that had reduced her to what she was?

Stephen politely assured her she could do nothing of the kind; but for the poor idiot brother and rascally (the adjective aside, reader) father, she need be under no anxiety. The former had been got into an idiot asylum by her friend the physician, and for the latter work had been found which would keep him going famously, if only he on his side would keep steady—and more shame for him if he didn't! (this another aside).

Stephen was very glad to have good news for the patient in whom, as Jane had said, he was so interested, but he gave it her in a cool business-like way, finding it quite a simple thing, not worth while making a fuss about, that she should be helped a little when she had done so much to help herself and others.

The girl was very happy—very grateful. Poor Tommy! it was what she had always so much

wished for him. How happy he would be—he had always been so fond of company he had, and he was so good, so gentle that he'd soon make himself at home; and everybody would get to like him, they couldn't help it—bless him! And father too—no fear of his not keeping steady just at first, he always did. “And then you know, sir,” she added, with a faint flush of pride, “he's such a first-rate workman, can turn his hand to anything when not in drink.”

Stephen respected the filial devotion that could still see an object of pride in the drunken wretch who had caused her so much shame; but not caring to listen to his praises he turned the conversation.

“A young lady has been to see you?”

The sharp wan face lighted up wonderfully as she answered—

“Oh yes, sir, and thank you kindly for sending her. She told me that it was you, sir, who had made her come—she's been every day since, and yesterday she was here more than two hours.”

“Well done, Jane Graves!” was Stephen's mental exclamation; “I thought I could trust you.”

“And she brought me those flowers,” pointing to some that stood on a table beside her; “she gathered them herself down in the dell, she said, and she told me such wonderful things about them, and all that she sees down there that it's just like reading a book, only not so fatiguing.”

Stephen's eyebrows were going up. Jane eloquent upon the subject of flowers! He certainly was surprised.

"She's such a sweet young lady, sir, and she speaks so beautifully of all sorts of things I never heard of before, and that makes me feel so—so—I don't know how—but when she's gone I think it all over, and then I don't feel so dull; and I dream of it o' nights, and yesterday she told me a story. But there she is, sir!" and with outstretched hand and eager look she bent forward.

"Mildred herself—by Jove!" Stephen exclaimed, and he fell back a step or two, scarce crediting the testimony of his own eyes. Yes, Mildred herself it was, in all her fresh bright childish prettiness, coming along joyously, even eagerly, running; yes, actually running to get there sooner—panting, breathless, with glowing cheek and flying hair. And Stephen crushed his strong right hand down upon the back of the invalid's chair, as he looked at her, and wished, perhaps, that she had never crossed his path, or that she could feel something of what he felt at that moment. Could he but have seen her subdued and pensive he would have blessed her, and now he could almost have cursed—no, not her, poor pretty innocent child; but the bounding step, the rosy cheek, and eager looks, that told so plainly that nothing lay behind. Arrived at the corner Mildred stopped short, and resting the handkerchief she held tied up in her hand, upon the low garden wall, undid an end to make sure

that the something it contained was still quite safe—smiled down at it with a well pleased little nod, then closed it again and turned in at the gate.

“For sure she’s brought me something to look at,” the sick girl observed, with a glad smile; “I never saw such things in London, and they’re so strange and beautiful; and the young lady seems to know all about them, which is no wonder, living among them, as she told me, all her life.”

A low soft tap at the door.

“Good-day, Miss Mildred.”

Was the look Stephen MacCullan bent upon the girl’s face a triumphant one? I am almost tempted to think it was. She paused on the threshold; not at once advancing into the room, not looking at him or his patient, or anything but the cambric handkerchief, which, as she held it gathered close to her bosom, came just within the range of her downcast eyes. He had looked so sternly at her the last time they had met, that it was no wonder she now avoided meeting his gaze, nor was it any wonder that feeling that gaze fixed upon her she blushed deeper and deeper as she felt that it was not withdrawn. It was not the flush of answering passion he had once looked for, that he knew well enough, but the soft, pure, childish blush, half-surprise, half-embarrassment, a little perhaps something else.

How long he might have stood there by the window looking at her, and she on the threshold blushing beneath his look, who shall say? But at that moment an interruption occurred in the

shape of a shock-headed damsel, who came bolting in, exclaiming in the shrillest of voices—

“Mrs. Puffit’s baby, sir, it’s a dying—quite black in the face.”

Mrs. Puffit lodged in the same house. “I’ll call in again on my way down,” Stephen said, and he followed the girl upstairs.

Mrs. Puffit’s baby *was* black in the face, and no mistake; and Mrs. Puffit herself, a weak, nervous, miserable-looking woman, whose life, for the last six years at least, had consisted in a succession of babies, not one of whom had been allowed by fate to cut its first tooth; which, as Mrs. Puffit often pathetically observed, would have been a great comfort, anyhow—was doing her utmost by loud cries and lamentations to make matters worse.

The child had been wrongly treated by the village apothecary, and was as near death as he well could be—ill-fated little victim! Dr. MacCullan knew the danger, and the cure too, if only there were time for it. One moment he paused, calculating the chances. “Twenty minutes more to live, five minutes to get home, straight across the fields. I can do it. Five minutes to get the instruments—five minutes to return—we’ve five minutes left for the operation. I’ll do it yet! If only Jane were there instead of— But she must help me, she must!”

The young dressmaker and her lady visitor were bending low over the cambric handkerchief, about the precious contents of which so many wonderful things had to be said; the poor shorn

head, and that other bright one, with its wealth of red gold hair, drawn very close together, for the visitor was perched upon the arm of the invalid's chair, and held the handkerchief spread out on her lap ; when the door opened once more, and Stephen MacCullan burst in, almost as precipitately as the shock-headed damsel had done, and with the same prefatory exclamation.

"Mrs. Puffit's baby ! please not to go till I return, I shall want you !" and the door closed.

Mildred did not go, of course not, but stayed on according to his command, and talked to the London dressmaker of all the strange beautiful things of which she could know nothing ; living, as she had always done, in that dark dull city room, with its one little tiny window looking out upon the range of smoke blackened chimney pots, and nothing beyond ; nothing, too, in her life beyond, but work—work—work. She had not known better then, it could never again be the same thing, no, not if she had to go back to the dingy room, to the stitching and starvation ; life could never be the hard, cruel thing it had been, but something quite different.

Ah, Mildred, Mildred ! what have you been about ? What, have your soft whispered talks of beautiful and wonderful things taught the poor little London dressmaker to dream ? Alas, yes. And what would Stephen—stern, practical Stephen—say to this, think you ? In ten minutes Dr. MacCullan was back.

"Please come ; I want you very much."

Very meekly she followed him upstairs.

Mrs. Puffit was still trembling and howling,

more hopelessly nervous than ever ; and Mrs. Puffit's baby was still very black in the face—gasping, choking, apparently dying. “I shall do it yet, please God !” Stephen said triumphantly, and taking the child from the shock-headed damsel's arms he held it out to Mildred.

“Please hold it, the mother's not fit to be trusted ; I know her of old.”

She looked up shuddering. “I couldn't—it's dying—I couldn't ! I never held a baby, never !”

She stood under the full fire of his stern, imperious glance, so white, so piteous, all the brightness faded out of her face.

“You would not like the poor baby to die ?” Was it the utter piteousness of the little white face that made his voice so soft, or the thought that, that—no matter, his voice was very soft indeed.

“Take it, Mildred.”

And the arms were outstretched, trembling still, but eager to receive whatever he might choose to place within them, those soft white arms that had never as yet been of any use except to cling about papa's neck.

“It wont last a moment, but you must keep quiet.”

It may seem strange perhaps that he should have trusted her to do so, but he did.

“And, if you like, you can shut your eyes.”

So pleased was he with her ready obedience that he was actually indulging in a joke. But it was no joke to her, poor little thing, and breathing a low soft “Thank you,” she did shut her eyes accordingly.

The operation was soon over. An incision

was made in the child's throat, and into it was placed a tube through which the breath, that could no longer force a passage through the inflamed windpipe, passed with a loud rushing sound.

"Bravo!" Stephen said to himself, shaking back the hair from his flushed face, for it had been a case of life and death, and he knew it. "That was a tidy little operation, one minute more and it would have been too late—bravo!"

That Mrs. Puffit's baby should have to carry for some hours, nay, perhaps days, a horrid, murderous looking tube in its tender throat, mattered very little to him; indeed, he was thinking far less of the infant, poor wee thing, than of his own medical skill.

When baby was taken from Mildred's arms they dropped heavily to her side as if in weariness, then a long shiver ran through her frame, and though free to go, she stood as if rooted to the spot, white and still, with bated breath and closed eyes, until Stephen assured her that there was no mortal reason for their remaining so, when they were very slowly and reluctantly opened; then still more slowly and reluctantly they were raised, but as they lighted upon nothing more formidable than Stephen's laughing down-bent look, she took courage, and asked faintly if she might go.

"Certainly, and if you allow me I will accompany you home."

Without awaiting her answer he took up his hat, and promising to call again in the evening

left the room, followed closely by Mildred, who seemed half afraid of being left behind.

"Well, wasn't I right in saying that you would make an ideal little sister of mercy?"

"Oh, but I only did it because you told me."

"A very good reason too," he said, half mockingly. "And are you sorry that I told you—are you sorry that I asked you to help me?"

"Oh no!" very decidedly.

"And what if I were always to ask your help—if I were to take you everywhere, to scenes of pain and sickness and sorrow?"

"I should keep very close to you, and only do as you bid me; and when anything looked very dreadful I should shut my eyes, and not open them again till you told me to."

"And do you think it would be impossible—quite impossible for you to be courageous and act independently, for the good of others?"

"I don't know."

"I do, I know that you'd find it just the easiest and most natural thing in the world if you were once put to the test. Suppose, for instance, that the person you best loved in the world were wounded, or had his arm broken, or were hurt, terribly hurt, in any other way you may choose——"

"Oh no, please don't suppose that—I couldn't bear it."

"But I must suppose just that, and what is more, you must bear the thought, that the person you best love is cruelly hurt, and you see him all covered with blood——"

"And looking dreadful—as dreadful as the man whose head you put into my lap?"

"Just so, only not quite so grimy, and with rather less hair about his face, but bleeding and pale and senseless with no one near to help him but you?"

"Well?" asked Mildred, breathlessly, finding that he had come to a standstill, and terribly anxious for the fate of the imaginary sufferer.

"Well, what would you do then?"

"To see some one whom I loved pale and bleeding with no one near to help him, oh, how dreadful! I should die, I'm sure I should."

"Not a bit of it! You'd run to him. I'm supposing your poor friend to be a man, you see, to make the connexion between him and the sooty-faced engine-driver, whose head, as you say, I put into your lap, all the closer. Well, you'd run to him, kneel down beside him, and very gently, very tenderly look for the wounded place. That found, and my ideal sister possessed of wonderful presence of mind, you'd dive down into his coat pocket and extract therefrom his handkerchief, bandage up the wound, then run off to look for water, and having found it you'd dip into it the dainty square of cambric hitherto consecrated to shells and flowers, and lifting the poor pale head on to your lap, you'd moisten with it his lips and brow, and so wait quite quiet and contented till further help came, or till the man you loved opened his eyes."

"Yes," answered the girl, softly, "if it were papa I would do all that—I feel I would."

"Of course," growled Stephen, in a queer tone of chagrin, and feeling no wish to pursue the subject.

"And if it were you I would do it too;" and she smiled up at him, nestling closer.

The brightening up of the clouded face proved clearly enough that it was of himself he had been thinking all the time, egotistical fellow that he was! And I am not at all sure that he would not at that moment gladly have submitted to a broken arm, or some such harmless little fracture, that would have put her devotion to the test. To lie quite passive with all those horrid doubts—those wild jealous longings hushed to rest, upon her bosom—to have the soft white arm beneath his head, the small, soft hand fluttering tenderly about him—to feel through the dim haze of semi-consciousness that she was bending down to look into his face, bending so low that her breath played about his lips, drawing him back insensibly to life.

Take care, Stephen, take care! You said, truly enough, that you could not do things by halves—not even love-making. Visions are dangerous things, Stephen, and so are evening strolls, dangerous but pleasant, all the more so, perhaps, for the risk run.

Stephen MacCullan was perfectly aware of a cut across the fields that would bring them to the Terrace in no time. He also knew of a path through the wood, quiet and shadowy, that would considerably lengthen the way, and this path he took.

"And what do you think of my little dress-

maker?" he said, when they had got fairly under the shadow of the trees. "Are you not glad to have made her acquaintance?"

"I don't know."

This was a very favourite answer with Mildred Graves. She never seemed quite sure of anything, perhaps because she had always felt so much more than she had reasoned.

"You don't know!" in an aggravated tone; "why, I thought you were already fast friends."

"I am so sorry for her. She always lived in a high, dark, London room, she says, and hadn't even a little bird or plant to look pretty and bright; and I tried to imagine how it would be to live there, and then I felt so sorry; and I tell her of the good and beautiful things I've seen that when she goes back she may not feel so dull. Yesterday I told her of the busy little ants I used to sit and watch in the garden at home, passing backwards and forwards along the road they had themselves made across the path, and one day I saw how a colony arrived at a new hill with all their luggage and treasures, and each one carried an egg much bigger than itself, and one handed it down into a hole, another coming up to the mouth to receive it."

"And she spoke of a story you told her."

"Yes, I know; the story of the echo."

"The echo?"

"Yes, she had never heard one, and I told her about it, and that reminded me of a story I had——"

"Read?"

"Yes, but not in a book; it was found in some papers of mamma's, and Jane gave it to me. At least I don't know if it's quite the same, for I seem to have dreamt it all over again since then."

"Tell it to me."

She took it as a command, it almost sounded like one.

"It is the story of some one who had no father or mother, or home of her own, but who was young and free and happy—so happy, until one day, when she sat quite alone and the sun was weaving its golden beams into her hair, a whisper stole into her heart, which from that hour grew heavy and sad, and all its peace was gone, because of the whisper and the answer that did not come. She never spoke of it to any one, for she knew that there was no one who would understand her. She had no father nor mother, no one who really loved her, and only those who love can understand you. So she spoke of it to no one. But one day, when she sat poring over a great, great Book that men call the Book of Nature, she read there how every one has just such a whisper at his heart, which the echo alone can answer. Some get their answer very soon, and are happy; some have to wait for it a long, long while, till the whisper has grown faint and tuneless, and the echo that comes in answer to it is faint and tuneless too; and some never find it at all, but live and die alone, waiting and longing for it. Then the girl, having read this, closed the Book, and wandered away to find the

echo that would make her happy. In her wanderings she saw many strange and beautiful things—she saw in far-off lands, where the sun never sets, and the flowers never fade, but bloom on in wild luxuriance all the year round ; where the traveller, intoxicated by their faint, sweet breath, lies down to sleep and never wakes again ; where fever and death fall on the earth with each glittering drop of dew ; where the snake, with its jewelled coils, lurks beneath the long grass, and all is beautiful and bright and deadly. Then she went where the storm breaks over snow-crowned mountain peaks, while peace and sunlight lie in the valley below. And she saw in far-off Arctic regions the great northern light ; and she saw, too, where an ice-bound vessel was lost upon an ice-bound sea, with the gleaming sails and the gleaming ice, and the faces of the dead crew gleaming upwards. All this she saw, and much, much more, but she did not find the echo ; and the whisper at her heart grew louder day by day, and listening and longing and waiting she grew faint and weary. But still she wandered on, and heard many sounds that were pleasant to her ear and made her glad. She heard the song of the nightingale, and the cooing of the dove, and the lone cry of the widowed lovebird. She heard the whisper of the breeze in the pine forests, and the chime of Sabbath bells, and the angel songs of the white-robed choristers, and the voice of kindness, which was the pleasantest sound of all ; but the echo that was to make her happy she listened for in vain.

“One day, when for very weariness her ear had grown dull, and could but faintly catch the heart’s faint whisper, when she was so tired, so tired of waiting for what never came, some one took her by the hand, and led her gently along a new and pleasant way. His voice was sweet, sweeter than anything she had ever heard except the Sabbath chimes and the angel song of the white-robed choristers, and his eyes, when they looked down upon her, were so good, so good that they always made her think of a picture she had once seen in the dim cathedral aisle when she knelt there all alone waiting for the echo, and when he drew her to him, and held her close, and spoke of things that were good and true, she was so glad to hear him that for awhile she ceased to hear the whisper at her heart, and forgot to listen for the echo, and followed him where he led. But she was not really happy, you know, and by-and-by the old longing awoke once more, and she remembered the words that she had read in the great Book, that she could never know real peace and happiness until she had found the echo. At last, after many weary years, when the evening shadows were falling—when the moon instead of the sun wove its beams into her hair—when her step was no longer light—when the kind voice that had come to comfort her was still, and the helping hand had dropped away from hers—when she was alone as before, only so much more alone, for her eye was dimmed to every sight, and her ear dulled to every sound—she came in the grey twilight of her life to

a gate that led into the Silent City. It was full of dark shadowy forms—not laughing and talking, shouting and quarrelling, buying and selling, like the denizens of the other great cities through which she had passed—they were all clad in black, the old and the young, the rich and the poor—no pride or vanity there, not one trying to be finer than the other, as she had seen elsewhere, and they all knelt with heads bowed and hands clasped together, and she thought within herself, ‘They too must be listening for the echo that will not come.’ So she asked one of them, an old man, who looked less unhappy than the rest, and whose eyes were not like theirs, bent down to the earth, but raised above—far above the city wall, and the trees that had been planted here and there—far above the mountains, that ever so great and high girded it around—she asked him what it all meant, and whether they were not listening for the echo? And he nodded his head and said, ‘Yes, yes, they were listening for the echo of the voices that had come and gone.’ ‘Come and gone? Then the echo so passionately listened for, longed for, waited for, could come—and go—whither?’ Her eyes followed those of the old man far away above the city wall, and the mountains, and all earthly longings, and she asked no more; but as she had walked far and was weary, she lay down to rest on a distant mound, where the grass was long, and the stone was broken, and no one came to kneel and listen, and there she fell asleep, and in her sleep, when darkness and silence fell over the city, when the

gate was locked, and all the other voices had passed away, the echo came. When the returning day found her there, it smiled. People said she was dead, but the day knew better; it knew that there was no such thing as death. After the night comes the morning. It's nothing to go to sleep in one place and awake in another, you know."

That was Mildred's story of the echo.

CHAPTER II.



S it from papa, dear?"

When a letter came from papa Mildred always deemed it her especial right to open and read it first. The letter, however, though coming from Beddington, was not from Dr. Graves. Jane had many friends in her native town, and the letter was from one of these.

Gossiping by letter is the next best thing to gossiping by word of mouth. If your heart is brimful of some important news, and all your friends for miles round have been made acquainted with it, or perhaps a wet day prevents the longed-for gossiping visit, what more comforting than to seize pen and paper and write to "dear Jane?"

Mary Rawlins was all the more anxious to write to dear Jane because she had for her a piece of news that would, she felt quite sure, prove a shock. Having herself had an eye upon the late Curate, Mr. Eden, that eye being constantly turned his way, saw naturally very much that it had no business to see—viz., symptoms of an attachment between the dear Curate and the dear friend, which had been anything but agreeable to herself. Jane gone, hope had revived; but the Curate gone too, she had given herself

twenty-four hours to forget him, and then turned her matrimonial eye in a fresh direction. But what about the piece of news that was to prove a shock? Well, reader, Mary Rawlins had a dear friend too, who lived in the town where Mr. Eden had obtained a curacy, and who, having a piece of news to communicate which would, she more than suspected, prove a shock to her dear Mary, seized pen and paper and wrote off as if for her life.

Four pages were duly filled, and the letter, such an affectionate one, signed; then came the postscript which filled another sheet. It began thus: "By-the-bye, have you heard of the engagement of Mr. Eden?"

Miss Rawlins's correspondent felt wonderfully convinced that she had not heard of it; she would have been dreadfully disappointed if she had. To be the first to tell a startling piece of news is so very pleasant!

An account of Mr. Eden's engagement filled the four pages. He had been appointed to a living where there was much hard work to be done and a wife was quite indispensable. He had left T—— for a few days' holiday, and when he returned he looked brighter and more cheerful than he had done ever since he came to the place. They had afterwards heard that he was engaged to a cousin, a penniless orphan not at all pretty, and slightly deformed; who was far from happy in her uncle's house, so he might be said to marry her rather from charity than love. The engagement was not as yet made public, by him

at least, for the girl had already written to a schoolfellow that she was engaged to Mr. Eden, who had got an appointment to the living of D——. And Miss Rawlins's dear friend further added that she had found on her brother's table a letter from Mr. Eden in which he says, "I am sorry that the news of the engagement upon which you congratulated me should already have got abroad; but what is to be cannot long be hid. I accept, therefore, your congratulations, and hope that all will turn out well. At least the poor little orphan cousin, whom I have hitherto regarded almost as my sister, is happy." This piece Mary Rawlins's dear friend had torn out and despatched with her own letter, that no doubt might remain as to the authenticity of her information.

It proved no shock to Miss Rawlins, who, as we have before said, had long since turned her matrimonial eye in another direction; but feeling quite sure that it would prove a shock to poor dear Jane, she seized pen and paper, and wrote as if for her life.

Of course she, too, enclosed the scrap of paper that had been cribbed from the trusting brother's table, and of course she, too, reserved the tit-bit to the last, and made of it a postscript.

Very eagerly did Jane welcome any letter coming from Beddington; it might tell her something of papa, or her poor—anyhow, the very sight of the postmark seemed to do her good.

She read Mary Rawlins's missive through,

postscript and all ; then she read the scrap that had been torn from Charles Eden's letter, rapidly at first, slowly and deliberately afterwards ; then she felt her cheeks burn, and every drop of blood tingle in her veins, and crushing the paper up into her hand, letter and scrap together, she thrust it into her pocket, and continued her work.

But the heat in her face and the tingling in her veins growing altogether unbearable, after awhile she got up. She was alone—thank God for that ! Mildred had slipped out, her soft good-bye unheard.

Not quite sure of herself, not very well knowing what she was about to do next, she went to the door and locked it. If she was going to make a fool of herself, no one must know, no one must suspect it. Her grief, even as her love, must be kept a secret, unknown, unshared ; she must face it alone, and bear it alone too, as best she might.

Not for a moment did she doubt the truth of what she had heard. She knew Charles Eden's handwriting as she did her own ; and she knew, too, of the poor little orphan cousin Lucy—not at all pretty, and slightly deformed—for he had often spoken of her tenderly, pityingly, with even more than brotherly affection. And now he was engaged to her. He had taken her out of pity ; yes, only out of pity, but he was none the less lost to her, Jane, for ever.

“ It is wicked, cruel, unjust ! How could he,

when I loved him so dearly—when I was faithful to him through all—how could he—how could he !”

Still Jane did not feel at all sure of herself, or how it would all end. She tried not to blame him, yet she felt how impossible it would have been for her to act as he had done. Was she better than he was—more true, more constant—or had he never loved her ? Perhaps all the time that he had seemed to care for her so much he had but fancied an interest in her ; and the short and too hasty engagement broken off in so sudden and marked a manner, he had gone back to the first love—to the poor little orphan cousin, of whom he had so often spoken with more than brotherly tenderness.

“ It is wicked, cruel, unjust. No, no, it is nothing of the kind ; he had the right to do as he pleased ; it was all broken off between us, and he said—he said that—neither had a right to judge or blame the other, whatever changes might occur. He’s done nothing wicked, only—I wish—oh dear !—oh dear !”

And then Jane, who had done quite well not to trust herself too far, but to lock the door in case of her feelings getting the better of her, burst into tears, and had the longest, bitterest fit of crying she had ever had in her life before, that swelled her eyes and her heart too, but did her a world of good for all that.

CHAPTER III.



HIGH, think you, is the sadder of the two—a dull, damp foggy day in London, with leaden skies, sloshy roads, slippery pavements—a drizzling misty rain tapping spitefully at the window panes, and a nasty wind forcing its way in the shape of an infernal draught into your *sanctum sanctorum*, that no one, not even the wife of your bosom, dare invade without special permission, but which it makes free with, as though it were a welcome and privileged guest, sweeping down the chimney and up to your very arm-chair; paralysing your spine, stiffening your neck, creeping up your legs, notwithstanding the protection of the table-cloth, forcing suicidal, or at the least murderous, impulses into your bedraughted soul? “Hold!” cries the startled reader; “murder—suicide! What can be sadder than that?” I will tell you. Murderous and suicidal impulses are very sad things doubtless, and by no means to be encouraged; but there is in them a certain amount of excitement, and there are certain times in our life when we feel too low, too depressed, to contemplate either the one or the other; and this state I consider worse than the other. And to this state I have been

many a time reduced on a bright hot summer's day in London—a day all glare and heat and dust and languor and suffocation. The pavement scorching your feet, and the sun scorching your eyes, the streets unbearable, and the house unbearable, and you yourself more unbearable to yourself than anybody or anything else. You don't feel inclined to quarrel with your worst enemy. Oh dear no!—it's much too hot for that; but you do feel mightily inclined to quarrel with yourself, and to wish yourself anything but what you are. If you were a fish, for instance, you would not be suffering all the torments of heat. Why are you not a fish? You envy those lying in the fishmonger's pail, and would rather change with than eat one. Why, upon *such* a day must you be an upright walking biped of the gorilla species, only distinguished from him by possessing a better-formed thumb, and the ability to laugh—clothed in broadcloth, condemned to sport a chimney-pot? Why are you not a gorilla?—you don't care a rap at this moment for your thumb, and could not laugh if you tried.

Now, do you see how this latter state is worse than the first? So long as you keep true to yourself, the world may go against you, the breath of its favour may blow hot and cold—may blow over your life, or over your good name—down your chimney, and down your back. You pity yourself, and coddle yourself up, and look out with tender precaution for some snug corner

where you can shelter your name or person from the evil blast; and if at times you have murderous or suicidal impulses, are they not prompted by the purest self-love? In the first case you would rid yourself of an enemy, in the last, of an enforced burden; in both, your sole object is to protect that dear self from harm—no matter at what cost. But once take part against yourself, once begin to say—Why am I what I am, and not something else? and it's all over with you!

It was a bright hot summer's day that would have been glorious in the country, that was simply intolerable in the close, sun-scorched London streets. How people could possibly be walking in those streets was a mystery to those who stood looking out at them from behind the shelter of Venetian blinds. Yet walkers there were of every age and condition, and they seemed to be hurrying along more frantically even than usual, panting and perspiring as they went. A real spirit of agitation was abroad, fanned perhaps by the breath of that hot south wind, that might well have stirred the most sluggish blood, and sent it careering through the throbbing veins. Men looked very red and fierce in the face, women too; the nursemaids more especially, for their Liliputian charges were fractious beyond anything before known; and patience, with the temperature at that height, was not to be expected even from nursemaids. The very dogs—ay, the mildest of them—looked quarrelsome and dangerous, and stuck their tails between

their legs with surly dejection, or stiffened them into an erect and warlike position. On the crowd went, hurrying and perspiring, throwing up clouds of dust at every step.

"And this is London—*this*?"

It was not one of the busy passers-by who said so, but a shabby, pale-faced woman, who stood at a window and looked out—looked out upon the white scorching pavement, upon the carriages, the walkers—upon all that constitutes a London street. Her head ached with the heat and noise, and she leant it wearily against the dim dust-covered pane, looking out.

"And this is London," she repeated, so wearily, so wearily.

Yes, Rhoda, it is London; and that crowd moving below your window is its gay fashionable world, or part of it at least—the world of which you dreamt, and for which you sighed with so foolish and passionate a longing. Do you remember all your fine visions of a grand house, and grand position, and grand husband who was to make a lady of you? Do you remember the glowing picture your fancy imaged forth of this same London, and the reception it was to give you—you, the fair young wife of its spoilt idol, the celebrated preacher—Arden Graemes? What has become of all your bright dreams, that you stand there so dejectedly, with the poor worn wistful face, and the shabby dress, and the tight-writhed hands—looking more lone and desolate than any creature under God's blessed sun? Is not your husband, Arden Graemes, one of the

most celebrated men of his day? Is he not run after, listened to, quoted, worshipped—made more fuss about than any one, except the new opera singer? Is not his likeness to be had at every photographer's? Is not all London just mad about him? Yes, of course it is. Few men in the wide world are as famous as Arden Graemes, the itinerant preacher!

But it is not of the husband's fame that the young wife is thinking, as she leans her aching head against the window-pane. It is not of the past either that she is thinking—the past, with its vain wicked dreamings. Her life has but the present, the passing hours as they lag on slowly one by one. The duties, the trials they bring with them, she meets as they come; but she never looks forward or back.

"How long he is; where can he have gone?" she muttered; and the heavy eyes grew anxious and troubled, "his words and looks were so wild; he may have got into trouble, or lost his way; I wish he were safe back."

She started, the door had opened, but only to admit a sooty-faced maid-servant. "Letter," she said, more curtly than courteously, placing one on the nearest chair, and then banged the door to again. Rhoda's pale cheek flushed. One fear alone haunted her, the fear of being traced by those at home. Twice only had she written, but in neither letter had she given an address; to see again the well-known characters, to read words of love and longing, to which she dare not respond; no, she had borne enough,

God knew she had, but she could not bear that !

Very slowly she went up to where the letter lay. " If it should be——" she breathed, half aloud. " This strange feeling of something impending that I have had all day !"

But her heart need not have beat so fast ; the letter was not for her, but for her husband. A passionate effusion from one of his many adorers ; from some pretty, innocent, foolish child, no doubt, who knew no better—who had heard him preach—had gazed, entranced, upon his wild, inspired looks—had admired the colour of his hair, the grace of his gesture, the delicacy of his hands, the music of his voice ; and burning, thrilling, sighing, verily believed there could be no greater blessing granted unto woman than the being allowed to breathe out her soul for his dear sake, and at his dear feet, of course. She knew nothing of the woman to whom had been granted by fate this living death at the great man's side—she knew nothing of the *man*—it was the preacher only that she and hundreds of other women equally fond and foolish, worshipped from afar. And how could they prove that worship except by the most extravagant missives ? Not a day passed but some young lady in her teens laid herself and her fortune, or if that were wanting, herself and her devotion, at the great preacher's feet. Devotion seemed such an easy, beautiful thing, when offered to that pale auburn-haired man ; for what knew they of him, or of the woman whose life was

linked to his, and who followed him wherever he went, true and close as his shadow. When he preached, in heat or cold, in fair weather or foul, a tall, thin, shabbily-dressed woman might have been noticed sitting or standing among the crowd — might have been, but she never was. The sermon over, it would naturally take some time for the congregation to get over it, for them to collect their senses, to recover breath ; that done, and they free to look round, lo, the preacher had vanished, the woman, too ; but about her they knew and cared nothing.

Noiselessly she had stolen up to his side, drawn him gently aside, wrapped the thick plaid she carried, about him, given him her handkerchief, that he might wipe from his brow the heavy sweat of exhaustion that had gathered there, and so led him quietly and safely home.

If it chanced at times to be said of the celebrated preacher—"A woman goes about with him," the answer always was, "Yes, his sister, I believe."

Rhoda did not read the letter she had taken into her hand. Such letters came every day, but she never read them, nor Arden either. Arden the pure, the austere, the saintly, they were not fit to meet his eye ; they might trouble his soul, and fill it with a vague sense of disquiet, like a sweet voice speaking in a strange language which we never before heard, and cannot therefore understand.

She glanced at the signature—Jessica—that was quite enough. "Poor child," she murmured,

with a faint, weary sigh ; “ she little knows—she little knows.” Then she tore it up, letting the scattered fragments flutter to her feet — another young, eager, happy heart feeding itself on delusions, throbbing and burning and fretting, grasping feverishly at the unattainable, and missing, maybe, the real. “ If she only knew !” and Rhoda thought with a certain tender pity of the young impetuous creature who was what she had once been. Once ! yes, it was very, very long ago, or so at least it seemed to her ; months may well seem years to those who have ceased to reckon time.

How sultry was the air—how oppressive ! Why did he not come back ? Why had she let him go alone ? she never did, but he had insisted with wild words and looks, and when he did so she dared not thwart him. He had spoken of an oath to the dead, and a visit to the dead, perhaps it was to a sister’s grave that he had gone. It was here, in the big cruel city, that she had died—the poor little sister whose death had driven him mad. Mad ; no one knew it but herself and his mother ; they called him great, when he was only mad.

Yes, Rhoda’s husband was mad ; but was he much madder than half the gay London world swaying to and fro beneath her windows ? If the busy thoughts surging through their minds at this moment could but be set down in black and white, what should we pronounce them but madness ? If a man is entirely possessed by an *idée fixe*, over which he broods day and night, to

the detriment of his health, his happiness, his very reason, is he not a madman? Well, there goes the man of business with his mind entirely possessed by the one monomaniacal idea of gain, and being thus possessed, he has ceased to be a rational being. He cannot see that to gain money by the loss of health is madness. If ill, he would give thousands to be cured, yet he recklessly sacrifices to the attaining of those thousands the health he would purchase later at so high a price. He is already a rich man, he could be a healthy and a happy man too; but he is neither, because he is mad, and his madness is gain. Now, as he walks below Rhoda Graemes' window his thoughts, a dreary chaos of figures, are as near madness as any Arden Graemes ever had. See him again this time next year, and he is a drivelling idiot, paralysed in mind and body.

“Well, then, if love of money is the sign of madness, there's no fear of my reason at least,” the reader may say, and so may that long-legged, long-visaged youth who's tearing along at such a break-neck pace, and with such a fierce dishevelled sort of air. But what right has the long-visaged youth to judge his fellow-creature when he's very certainly the madder of the two? for pounds, shillings, and pence are a tangible folly at least, something you can hold up between your finger and thumb, and say—“Here it is!” whereas you, sir, are only madly in love, and love is a thing of the imagination, a sheer disorder of the mind. It may be something real, but in nine cases out of ten it is not. The poor maniac tells

you with tears and every mark of the deepest distress that he's the Emperor of China, expelled and exiled by his ungrateful subjects, and you nod your head sympathizingly, and say, "Yes, yes," though you know that he's nothing of the kind. The long-visaged youth tells you that he's desperately in love and quite broken-hearted, having been jilted and forsaken by Maria, and you nod your head sympathizingly, and say, "Yes, yes;" though, not being mad yourself upon the subject of love at least, you know that he's nothing of the kind—that it's a simple hallucination, and nothing more. And where's the difference, I should like to know, between believing yourself the exiled Emperor of China, or the broken-hearted adorer of Maria, when you're neither the one nor the other. One shade of difference there certainly is in favour of the latter, for whereas the poor Emperor is quite incurable—so we have been told by his keeper—the long-visaged youth will be cured fast enough. In less than a year we hope to see him clothed and in his right mind, with a charming photo, not that of Maria, carried about with him in his pocket-book, and if questioned upon the scarce-remembered past which is now the all-engrossing present, he would say of himself just what we now say of him (but not to his face), "I was a fool, there's the long and short of it." And so in very truth it is.

Madness, madness everywhere, in the counting-house, the great world, the church, the government, in the human heart. False show is madness, the Emperor of China with his paper crown and

broomstick for a sceptre. Bigotry is madness, and false sentiment too, and pride and vanity.

The sun poured down its flood of unshadowed light upon the white pavement, and the white houses, and people were very glad of the Venetian blinds that protected them a little from its heat and glare. Rhoda alone did not draw down the blind. She was used to the heat as she was to the cold. She never thought of herself, she was not thinking of herself then; she was getting uneasy at Arden's long absence, and was watching for his return. She opened the window, and leant against the sash in the full flooding sunlight. A young man, tall, stout, handsome, and remarkably well dressed, walking briskly along on the other side of the pavement, happening to look her way, saw her.

“She here!”

“He here—O God!”

Then she had seen him too, or she would never have uttered that sharp, forlorn cry. She would never have fallen back so suddenly, clasping her hands, and wringing them before her with such a gesture of despair.

A moment's hesitation, a pause, as if to recover from the first shock, and he crossed the road and entered the house.

She knew it, though she had turned so sharply from the window, and fixed her eyes with such a blank stare upon the opposite wall. She knew that in another moment she should stand face to face with her old love Frank Randolph, whom she had so wronged. Had he come to reproach—to curse

her? What mattered it, what mattered anything now! She had felt so much, and suffered so much, once, in the space of a few hours, those first hours of discovery, of shame, horror, and despair, that from that time forth all strong emotion seemed dead within her. He might come if he chose, it would have been better, much better, if he had gone on his way, but he was there, and she must see him.

Yes, he was there; she could already hear his footstep on the stairs—the quick, firm, eager step that had always made her heart flutter and her cheek flush, that only made it turn pale now—how pale! Whiter and whiter grew her face, and drawn and hushed like that of a victim awaiting her doom.

A sharp impetuous knock, then the door on which her straining eyes were fixed, opened, and Frank Randolph stood on the threshold.

“Rhoda.”

“Frank.”

Slowly the long-severed hands went out to meet each other—his warm and throbbing, hers cold and pulseless as the hand of the dead. And standing thus hand in hand, the two friends, who were to have been something so much nearer and dearer, looked each other once more in the face. His eye was the first to sink beneath hers, perhaps because he could not bear to look at her.

“You knew me again!”

“Yes; I knew you.”

God alone knew how. It is said that in another world, and under another form, we shall know those again whom we have really loved.

Perhaps it was thus Frank Randolph knew again the woman he had so truly loved.

A long silence fell between them; slowly as the hands had met, so slowly did they drop apart. She did not bid him welcome, nor ask him to sit down; she still wished that he had gone his way, and left her to go hers. What could the meeting bring but shame and pain for both? She stood with the flooding sunlight falling full upon her—upon the wan faded face, the shabby black dress—she always wore black as if in mourning for the past—the thin folded hands. And the man who had so loved her, who had so gloried in her fresh young beauty, dared not look at her, dared not speak to her.

But Rhoda looked at him, and indifferent as she was to everything now, she yet admired him, as he stood before her in his youth and health and unshadowed manly beauty. What a contrast to that other form, pale and shrunken and bowed, with wild disorder in his looks, his dress, his manner. Both men had suffered—yes, Frank had suffered—she never for a moment doubted that, for he had loved her dearly and lost her; but suffering, far from degrading, had made a man of him. It had imparted to his whole bearing something of strength and grandeur; to his face the inscrutable expression that can only be imparted by the sorrow that ennobles. Not a year before she had almost despised him, and looked down upon him as a mere boy; now she looked up to him as we look up to those who have suffered and fought and conquered. He had conquered be-

cause he was strong, and she respected him all the more for the manly self-respect that had caused him to rise instead of sink beneath the blow she had struck him. If she had allowed him to love her and live for her, he would have done so, keeping true to her and his love to his dying day ; but she had not—she had jilted him for another, and he had stood his ground like a man, not allowing her to ruin his life as she had done her own. And there he now was, full of life and health and vigour ; well looking, well dressed, with a prosperous air about him that was so pleasant to her eyes after the privations, squalor, and disorder that beset her in her vagabond life.

“ You are looking very well,” she said, softly ; but rather as a mother would speak to her son than a woman to the man she loved. “ I am very glad.”

“ God knows how I suffered,” was the low, scarce audible whisper ; and she felt that what he said was true.

“ You men are so different from us women,” she went on musingly ; for in the last few months Rhoda had learnt to muse and reason upon many things, and to see clearer than she had ever done before. “ A man, if he is worth anything, though he may have a great sorrow, attends to his business, and goes on steadily rising in the world, and does not allow it in any way to interfere with his career or his life ; for a woman, on the contrary, after a great sorrow, life is over ; fretting takes from her all that made her worth

anything—her youth and good looks—and she sinks lower and lower physically, if not morally, without an effort to rise.”

She spoke in the tuneless, monotonous tone of one thinking aloud, without bitterness or regret, speaking of what was—the inevitable. What had been the sorrow that had brought her so low—that had robbed her of youth and beauty and hope—of all that made life worth the having?

Did he despise her for that poor faded face—for that worn shabby dress—for the contrast she presented to himself? Rhoda Hayes, the ideal love of his youth, was lost to him for ever; to his life—even to his dreams—more effectually lost than if he had seen her dead, and lying in her coffin. Never again could she appear to him other than he saw her now.

“Oh, Rhoda! I can’t bear it. What shall I tell them all at home?”

“Nothing. You must never tell them that you saw me.”

“I—I never could.”

He felt that he was going to give way—to make a fool of himself. If only she would have cried—gone into hysterics or a faint—got up a scene like any other woman, it would have been a relief, and he would have borne it better. But to see her standing there so pale, so thin, so wretched, with that solemn look in the great hollow eyes, it was more than he could bear. How could he speak except to tell her the truth—that he would rather—oh, how much rather—that she had died in the old home, and he had followed her

to the grave, and then gone home to think of her, and live faithful to her memory, so as to join her when his hour should come, than have found her thus. How could he ever bear it, or the thought of it? Would it not be better to forget than be haunted by such a memory as that?

"They are all—well at home?"

No answer; the man's features were working convulsively. If he spoke another word it would choke him; if she repeated the question he must give way.

She did not repeat it, yet he gave way entirely, and because he could no longer stand upright and battle it out with himself like a man; he who had proved himself so brave, so strong; he sank at her feet and buried his face in her dress. She felt how his whole frame was shaken with sobs; he could weep and she could not! The fount of her tears had been long since dried up. She could only feel very sorry for him—and for herself too—and wish that he would not lie there at her feet, but get up—and smile down upon him faintly, glad, even in the midst of so much sorrow, that he still loved and pitied her. She tried to think of something that would comfort him; she put out her hand as if to touch him, but his head, crushed down upon her dress, was bent nearly to the ground. She looked at him with wistful, troubled eyes, still wishing that he would get up and let them speak as friends. What could she say to comfort him? Her eye fell upon the little plant on the window-sill—that she had stolen from the

dear, lost home—the one thing still left her to love and cherish. It had so often comforted her ; would it have power to comfort him ? Stooping down towards him, she said—

“ Do you remember, Frank, a little plant you brought me on my last birthday ? Look, there it is, as full of flower as when you gave it me ! I took it away with me from home, and carry it about with me everywhere. I’m so fond of it ! I thought perhaps it would die. But it could not, I take such care of it ; and when the first bud came out—it was many months ago, you know—I was so glad that—I couldn’t help crying ! Many beautiful buds have come out since then ; but it was only the first that made me so very happy.”

The young man’s head was still bent—his face was still hidden. What she had said had not comforted him. She looked down on him with a drear, blank look. Was he grieving for himself or for her ?

“ I am not unhappy,” she began again, divining vaguely that it was the sight of her that had upset him ; “ and I want for nothing. It’s the constant moving about from place to place that tries me ; but I’m not unhappy ! and he’s so good—God only knows how good !”

“ Your husband ?” Frank asked, looking up suddenly.

“ Yes, my husband—my *spiritual* husband !” with a wan smile, a faint blush rising to her cheek. “ In the eyes of the world we are brother and sister, in the eyes of God we are so

too ! Ours is the union of souls only ; that is his doctrine, you know. He is very good, and I try to do my duty by him—as his sister !”

Had he understood her ? She hoped he had. She thought that, if he still loved her as he had once done, it would comfort him to know that her union with the man for whom she had forsaken him was one of duty, not of love.

Still kneeling at her feet he looked up, the red blood mounting to his very temples.

“ Rhoda, I never loved any woman but you ! I could never love another so long as I live ! Give me a kiss, Rhoda—just one—for all I’ve suffered, for all I’ve lost—just one kiss ! You refused it me once. Do you remember ? Give it me now. It would be such a comfort to me, and—I’ve suffered so much !”

One kiss ! Was that the comfort she was to give him—only one—as he said, in return for so much love and sorrow ; the kiss that in her girlish wilfulness she had refused him, thinking of the many that were to follow. How handsome he looked, how noble ; how proud she felt of him and his love—how bitterly she regretted the past ! One kiss, the seal set to her doom and his ; no wrong done to the husband, who asked neither for her kisses nor her love ! She bent her head forward, her hand wandered softly towards his, her lips quivered as if with very eagerness to give what had once been so cruelly denied. But at that moment another face—not handsome or noble, but pale, haggard, wild, with great burning eyes, and red, loose, flowing

hair framing it around—came between her and her first love. She was his wife, and he trusted her—pure and spiritual as an angel of God—he trusted her as he did himself. Slowly her head sank back, low drooped upon her breast, and, as the trembling hand touched his, it was withdrawn.

“I am very sorry I did not give you the kiss you asked for when it and all that I had belonged to you. Now it would not be right to give it. He is my husband, and—he trusts me !”

Frank did not insist further. He rose to his feet slowly and with difficulty, and, now that the flush of excitement had passed, he looked pale and dejected.

“Is there nothing I could do for you ?”

“Nothing.”

He glanced around the room—the bare, squalid room ; he glanced at the worn, shabby dress, at the worn, pinched face, at the thin hand raised to her bosom ; that poor thin hand, on which there shone no wedding-ring, for the finger upon which her husband had placed it having grown thinner and thinner, it had one day fallen off, and she had not replaced it. Why should she ? It needed not that outward pledge of their union to remind her of the duty she owed him. And for the world—it only knew her as his sister.

Upon that hand, once so plump and white and cared for, the man’s eyes lingered longest, then they dropped sorrow-weighted to the ground.

“Your parents suppose you to be a fine,

grand lady, too fine and grand to notice them, or accept anything at their hands."

"I want for nothing."

"It would make them so happy to give——"

"I want for nothing."

Something in the dreary repetition of the words chilled and silenced him. He saw that she was waiting for him to go, and having nothing more to hope for, nothing more to say, he went; and, as the door closed upon him, Rhoda for the first time fully realized all that they had lost, he and she, all that might have been, and was not, and never could be. The happiness of two lives wrecked—his as well as hers. He was strong, and noble, and brave, but he was not happy—would never perhaps be happy again. He had not cursed or even reproached her; he was very good, but it was not of his goodness she was thinking just then, but of him, and the love that was lost to her for ever.

She stood at the door listening to his retreating footsteps until she heard the street-door open and close; then she went back to the window, back into the full flooding stream of sunlight to watch him to the last; straining her eyes and holding in her breath until he had turned the corner and was out of sight. He did not look back, not once, but walked straight on with head erect. How handsome he looked and grand! To what a different world did he belong; and yet his world had once been hers, and she had despised it! A film was gathering before her eyes. No wonder! But she dashed

it away almost angrily ; nothing must interfere with that last look—nothing ! But he was gone at last ; and she turned back into the room, and wondered why it looked so empty.

“ I must not see her again ; no, I must not see her again,” said honest Frank to himself, as he plodded slowly and heavily along the crowded London streets. “ She’s another man’s wife, as she said, and I love her still—I must not see her again !”

CHAPTER IV.



F Arden had looked wild when he left the house, how much wilder did he look when he returned about half-an-hour after Frank Randolph's departure?

And how had that half-hour been spent by Rhoda? Nestling close up to the little plant that he had given her, that had always been so dear to her for his sake, but which would, she felt, be so much dearer now that she fully realized how much she loved him, she sat and dreamt. A very foolish thing to do, but the best of us do foolish things sometimes; and how could she at once tear herself away from the thoughts his presence had called up, and go back to the sad, dreadful present, with his voice still ringing in her ears, and his form as vividly distinct as though he had never left her. "It was there he stood, just there," she mused; "and he knelt at my feet, and hid away his face in my dress" (smiling down upon it, and stroking it lovingly with her poor thin fingers), "as if he were ashamed of me, ashamed to look at me; but it was not that, it was only that he was sorry, so sorry; and he wept and sobbed like a child, and I could not cry, though I felt so sorry, too, for

him and for myself. He had not forgotten or ceased to care for me, though I behaved so badly to him and nearly broke his heart, and he knew me again. Father and mother would never know me, I'm sure ; but he did. We're both changed, I and he ! How fine and manly he's grown ; nothing of the boy left in him after his great trouble. Mother always said he was a fine fellow, and I thought so too sometimes, though I would never say it. And he knew me again, for all my altered looks and shabby dress, he knew me again ; dear Frank—dear, noble, handsome, true-hearted Frank !” And the woman rested her aching head down against the little plant that was so dear to her for his sake, and encircling it with her arm, dreamt on—until the door opened once more—and Arden, pale, haggard, disordered, dust-covered, entered. Rhoda sprang up at once, and went to meet him, almost angry with herself for having so long neglected to look out for and feel uneasy about him, for having so completely forgotten him whilst she sat and dreamt of another, and that other so different from him, so noble, so strong, whilst he——”

“ He's one of his bad days, poor fellow,” she said ; and she alone could know all that was comprehended in those few simple words, so simply spoken—all of shame, of terror, and despair. “ A bad day ?” Yes, bad enough, God knows, but what was that compared with the night that would be sure to follow such a day, when the wife, not daring to look upon the husband's weakness, upon his wild looks and gestures,

would, in very shame and pity, blow out the candle, and leave him to darkness and to her. When wrestling, agonizing, he would lie along the floor like some wild stricken beast, always harmless, with something of solemn mystery wrapping him about even in his maddest ravings, but those ravings none the less sad and awful for that; his throes of mental agony none the less terrible to witness; and the woman whose fate was indissolubly bound to his would sit cowering in some distant corner, not frightened, scarcely even shocked now, only cold and still, with tight writhed hands and averted looks, uttering no words, only waiting, until gasping and worn out, he would come crawling to her feet. He always knew where she was, and found her out, though amid the darkness he could not always see her; and she would draw the stricken head on to her lap or bosom, and coax him to sleep, sometimes from very weariness dropping off to sleep herself, but oftener, far oftener, hushed and white and rigid as the dead, she would wake and watch out the night.

Vague whisperings of these midnight wrestlings with the power of evil had got afloat, adding not a little to the preacher's fame. It was the spirit of the saint and prophet wrestling in prayer—sublime, mysterious communings of the creature with the Creator—visions granted unto him as they had been granted of old to the prophet and the apostle.

When, in the grey, chilly dawn, the landlady, awed and curious, would come stealing into

the room, staring with pale, scared looks at the two lonely figures seated so motionless amid the shadows, the woman whom they called his sister would point to the white, still face pillowed against her breast, and whisper softly, "Don't wake him ; he sleeps."

"He's one of his bad days," she repeated, looking at him anxiously ; "I shouldn't have let him go alone."

"You are late, dear," she said, gently. She always spoke very gently to him ; a harsh word would make him start and quiver all over. He had never been used to hard words or looks, and could not understand them. "You must be tired?"

"Yes, I am tired," he answered, stroking back from the wan spectral face the tangled masses of red flowing hair. "I'm very tired ; I've been going back along the last seven years, and it's a weary, weary way. You can go bounding lightly enough over the ground of the future ; but it's heavy work retracing your steps along the road of the past."

He had come close up to the window, and stood on the very spot where Frank had stood but an hour before. Rhoda had followed him, keeping close at his side. She somehow felt more sorry for him now than she had ever done before. Her own sorrow, brought once more so palpably before her, instead of hardening her heart, had opened it all the more to his sorrow. He, too, had a past to mourn—the wicked, cruel past that had driven him mad. She longed to

say something that would soothe him, that would turn his thoughts from the contemplation of his wrongs. His dark, moody looks were bent upon the little flower that was so dear to her for Frank's sake, with which she had thought to comfort him as he wept at her feet.

"See, dear, it has a new bud ; it came out this morning. I counted them over yesterday, and there were only four ; there are five now."

"A bud—you said a bud ; a few tender leaves, so green, so fresh, and the soft pink peeping out here and there, giving promise of the opening. I saw it lying on my path ; I watched it day by day, but it never opened—never !"

She saw how his looks kindled, how the hectic flush of excitement had mounted to his cheek, and she hastened to say with soothing playfulness, "Oh, but my little bud will come out ; you will see it will be out to-morrow."

He turned from it to her almost fiercely.

"Yes, and faded and withered, and blasted the next. Better die now, when still fair with its early promise, than outlive that promise in a single day !"

A sweep of his arm, swift and sudden, and the plant lay at his feet, the pot shattered, the leaves and blossoms scattered around, the stalk broken to the root, and on this root he set his foot in his blind fury, crushing the life out of it.

A low broken cry, and Rhoda was on her knees beside it. That forlorn cry, that despairing gesture recalled him to himself, awoke him

to a sense of what he had done. Awed and subdued, he stood before her, looking down upon the poor dead flower, and the bent crouching form beside it. With eager, trembling fingers Rhoda was trying to raise it up, to give it the appearance of life for awhile at least, but it would not do; all her efforts were vain. It was dead, quite dead, its life crushed and trampled out of it. She realized this at last, and with an inarticulate exclamation, half cry, half sob, rose, laid it a shapeless mass upon the window-sill, where it had stood and blossomed, and put forth pretty tender buds day by day, and been such a comfort and resource to her—and turned away.

Arden stood as if rooted to the spot, looking from the plant to the woman's face, and back again; and then, as if realizing all that the little flower had been to her, he cried out in a tone of agony—

“Oh, Rhoda, what have I done? what have I done? You loved that little flower, and you were so good to it; it was all you had, and I have killed it. I am so sorry, but I cannot call it back again to life, nor can you, for all your love. Where it lies it lies; it is lost to you for ever, and it is I who killed it!”

He was bending over it his wild wan face, and his heavy breathing stirred the scattered leaves, making them shiver and tremble.

“Never mind, dear,” said a soft pitying voice close by, and a gentle arm stole round his neck.

He turned, bewildered, and saw Rhoda smiling up in his face.

"Oh, Rhoda!"

"What's done is done, and it's no use fretting about it. My poor plant is dead, and it's better so, much better."

"Better?"

"Yes, dear; when we go from place to place I have to carry it, you know, and it's very heavy, and my arm often aches from its weight. And then in the cold winter weather it might die, and that would be so sad. To see it dying day by day, and leaf by leaf! And then, too——" She paused; her head drooped, her lip quivered, and her voice faltered just a little. "It was the only thing I had that could remind me of the past, and sometimes it did remind me of it—and to-day—— Don't be sorry for what you've done; it's better so, much better."

And again she smiled up in his troubled face, and sighed, well pleased, when she saw that she had prevailed to comfort him.

Later on in the evening, as she sat by the window, her hand laid upon the withered leaves and blossoms that would to-morrow be swept away out of her sight, but her face averted from them, she heard Arden muttering to himself—

"Better so? Better that the fair and innocent, who could have lived so happy upon God's beautiful earth, should be struck down, trampled upon by the violence of the strong, trodden down six feet into the earth; for the grave tells no tales! Better for whom—for him or for her?"

Death better than life? Yes, than such a life—
how much better!"

So Arden Graemes muttered, with sad, solemn
eyes fixed on vacancy, and Rhoda knew that it
was not of her he was thinking, or her poor
dead flower either.

CHAPTER V.



IF Stephen MacCullan really thought that the best and safest thing for him to do was to keep out of Mildred's way—not in a mean, sneaky sort of manner, but quietly and naturally, as it were—he should not have put charitable notions into her head. If before he had come upon her much oftener than he could have wished, in the Rockstone garden, in his mother's drawing-room, on the cliffs, in the dell—when Woolfert chanced to lead him there in their evening stroll—he now met her where she was much more dangerous—in the cottages of his poor patients, talking to the London dressmaker and nursing Mrs. Puffit's baby, who had now got rid of the nasty murderous-looking tube, and was quite frisky and gay, having actually contrived to cut its first tooth, much to the mother's surprise and delight.

That Mildred looked very pretty in the Rockstone garden, in the pleasant Rockstone drawing-room, on the breezy cliffs where the wind caught the bright hair and blew it about her face, is certain; but that she looked ten times prettier, in his eyes, at least, as the ideal little sister of mercy of whom he had once spoken to her, is equally certain. Ten times prettier and ten

times more dangerous, and nothing left for him but the agreeable conviction that it was all his own doing. Had ever master such a docile and eager disciple? At times he could not help smiling at the child's mighty attempts at gravity, and usefulness, and womanly decorum. And though not more conceited than most men—rather less so on the whole, perhaps—he could not but be aware that it was for his sake the change had been operated. And if a few weeks could effect so much, what might not the future have in store for them—for her and for him?

Stephen did not ask this of his heart, but his heart asked it of him again and again. "Stephen," it said, "will you ever, in the course of your professional career, meet such a sweet lovable creature as Mildred Graves? Having loved her, will you, could you, ever love another? And if not, what is left to the long life that lies before you?"

What, indeed! We can very well live without love. We have our profession, our business, our name, the favour of the world, and many another good thing quite worth living for; but having once really loved and lost, what is left to that inner life of the feelings that with one weighs so much—with another so little? Stephen's heart asked him that very important and rational question again and again; but the answer to it was never forthcoming. He dared not find one; he dared neither to despair nor to be happy.

It is thought by many, a matter hard of belief that our first parents were expelled from Paradise

with the angel's flaming sword. Would not our Christian faith be still more sorely tried were we told that they had voluntarily expelled themselves? Adam, not choosing to believe himself blessed, forcing open the golden gate, and quietly making his exit; Eve meekly following, as in duty bound. No angel, no fiery sword, nothing needed for the fatal expulsion, but man's perverted views of life. Of all the troubles that assail us, how many are real and how many imaginary? We are not happy just because we wont be happy; we torment ourselves ten times more than any one else torments, or would dare to torment us—imagining the avenging flash of the sword of doom where there is only the gliding sunlight falling across our path; we give ourselves up for lost, and make a headlong rush at the gate of our Eden, which too often closes upon us for ever.

Stephen was making life a burden to himself by doubts and fears, jealousies and suspicions, that had no foundation whatever. Up to the last month he had said to himself, "Mildred is a pretty, soft creature, with more in her—child though she seems—than half your clever, strong-minded women who would fain turn the world topsy-turvy, just to put everything out of its place, themselves and their sex among the rest. But she's been spoilt from her cradle, and could only be a hindrance to me in my hard professional life. She knows nothing of the stern reality of that life, of its trials, its hardships, its difficulties, its temptations, its duties. It may all be child's play for her, but it is not and cannot be such to me. She is

a child—I am a man. My interests never could be hers, nor my work either.”

And when he saw her sitting beside the sick girl in whom he was so interested, and who would not have exchanged her companionship for that of the most strong-minded and energetic of district visitors; or when he saw her with Mrs. Puffit's baby in her arms, coaxing it to sleep on her bosom as no one else could, with her soft cooing words and songs, what said he then? Why, then he seized upon the flaming sword of jealousy, and cried, “She doesn't love me—she could never love me, and her love alone could make me happy. It's all very well to be meek and gentle and submissive—but that's not love; and I must have her love. She must love me as I love her, or I'll have nothing to say to her.”

It must not be supposed that Stephen MacCullan had so very humble an opinion of his own merits that he believed himself altogether incapable of inspiring love; but he had got hold of a nasty haunting suspicion, fostered by words his mother had let fall, by others that Jane had let fall—ay, and Mildred, too, which was the worst of all! She had some love affair at Beddington, which most satisfactorily accounted for her thus suddenly leaving home, and remaining away so long. The memory of a first love stood between them, separating them more completely than anything else could have done. A memory, indeed! How did he know that it was only that? How could he know that she was not fretting after

the fellow still—pining in secret and all that sort of thing? She had such a wild yearning look in her eyes at times; could it mean love for another? To that question, also, there came no answer—none, at least, but the clenching of the teeth, and the strong right hand, and the darkening of the heavy brow. Poor, proud, jealous, self-tormented Stephen!

One evening, going for his usual stroll, with Woolfert at his heels, he met Jane hurrying along with a basket and a very business-like air.

"Little Tommy has the fever," she said, nodding to him in passing, but not pausing to shake hands. "I shall be back in an hour. Please tell Mildred so, if you meet her. She went that way," pointing to the path he was following.

Stephen watched her out of sight, then turned sharp round upon his heel. He had no wish to come upon Mildred, and just because he had avoided her, he could not help thinking of her—all the more for the careless and indifferent air he tried to assume—whether to deceive himself or Woolfert, it is not for us to decide.

"Halloa, old fellow! Why, what's in the wind now?"

Something, most decidedly; for Woolfert stopped short, threw back his ears, erected his tail, then bounded off. In vain his master called him back. "He's sniffed a friend or foe," he laughed, "and wouldn't turn his back upon either." And to the laugh succeeded a sigh.

Yes, Woolfert had found a friend, and a very good one too.

"Down, Woolfert! down! You dear, stupid old fellow!"

Stephen started, flushed, frowned, and gave vent to an impatient exclamation.

"I turn to the left, to get out of her way. The fates are against me!"

Quite unconscious of offence, or of any evil meditated against her, Mildred received Stephen MacCullan with an eager greeting.

"I saw you coming. Long before Woolfert found me out, I saw you coming."

"Well, that's one advantage at least of being tall; that your friends can see you from afar, and get out of your way if they choose; whereas your little people are always being popped upon suddenly, and there's no avoiding them if you would."

"Do you mean me?"

Yes, he very certainly had meant her; but it would have been too cruel to answer the wistful pleading of her eyes by a straightforward "Yes."

"I was speaking generally; but I hope you are not sensitive on the point of height?"

No one listening to Stephen's light, careless words, and catching the half-mocking, half-deprecating look, in the downbent eyes, would have guessed what that fair childish creature was to him. He was strong, and could disguise his feelings, generally.

"I don't mind being little. Why should I?"

"Well, there's a certain advantage in being tall, I suppose, or high-heeled boots would not become the fashion. It's deemed an advantage to stand high in the world, and it's pleasanter to owe your height to nature than to your shoemaker. The goddesses, too, were all fine women, depend upon it."

He was in a nasty teasing mood was Stephen MacCullan, though he was laughing, and looked so perfectly good-natured. He was still half angry with her for getting in his way when she didn't love, and could only bewilder and madden him.

Mildred looked down ruefully at her own little person, then up at the tall, stalwart form before her, as if comparing their heights.

"Yes, it's true—you're very tall, and I'm very little," she said at last, with a quick catching of the breath that was almost a sigh. "I never thought of that before, or that it was a defect not to be tall; but of course it is. I am very sorry," she added, almost penitently; "I wish I were tall, very tall—as tall as Miss Miller, if you think that nice."

Miss Miller was a remarkably tall, angular, and rather masculine young lady, who visited at Rockstone, had declared open war and secret love to the handsome young doctor, and was as noisy as she was tall.

Stephen shuddered at the vision thus conjured up, and hastened to change the conversation.

"You were not at Mary Howitt's to-day?" he asked, quietly seating himself upon a fallen

tree. He had not got into her way ; she had got into his—fate was against him, as he had said, and where's the use of fighting against fate ? So he sat himself quietly down, and asked her if she had not been to see Mary Howitt, just as if he had a right to inquire into her doings.

"No, not to-day," she answered, with her happy, child's smile ; and she then seated herself at Stephen's side, the dog stretching himself at the feet of both. "The day was so beautiful, and I always promised myself a long, long walk to Witcombe Dell ; so I took a holiday. I told her that I should, yesterday, and she did not mind, for she knew that I should tell her all about it, and make her see it all just as I did ; and then she cannot have felt very sad to-day, for she had the sun to make her glad, and the flowers I took her yesterday, and the book I lent her. And oh, I have had such a happy, happy day !"

"You seem to find it the easiest and most natural thing in the world to be happy," he said, in the dry, unpleasant tone that was so much more habitual to the mother's lips than the son's.

"Beautiful things always make me happy."

"Then they must be connected with no sad or regretful thoughts."

He was not looking at her as he spoke, but at the dog at their feet, running his stick up and down its shaggy coat, with an impatient movement.

"Whatever is sad I try to forget—always."

"Very philosophical. And you succeed, I hope?"

"Sometimes."

"A convincing proof that what can be so easily forgotten was not worth the remembering. The troubles of your age are just the things to be pondered over, chronicled in a journal, or a copy of verses, or a confidential letter to some young lady friend. I congratulate you upon having so short and facile a memory."

Slowly Mildred raised her eyes, and turned them upon his face, fixing them gravely there awhile until the veiling lid descended and hid them and their deep inscrutable look. But the look was lost upon Stephen, whose gaze was still bent upon Woolfert, and it was to him that his next words were addressed.

"Come here, old fellow! I've something to say to you. I'm in a moralizing mood, and it's tiresome work having only oneself for a listener; so I mean to victimize you. Fortunately for you you can't be bored, so you're the best audience a moralist could have."

The dog thus invoked, raised its monster head and laid it upon his master's knee with a look of sleepy acquiescence.

"Here is a young lady who can forget whatever and whenever she pleases, who can be perfectly happy because the sun shines. Do you believe in such a state of things? I don't; for I know that perfect happiness is a delusion, and

if you could speak, you would say the same from experience. I give you a bone, a large promising bone, well filled with marrow ; your eyes glisten, your mouth waters, your tail wags, you consider that in that bone lies perfect earthly felicity ; but the bone gnawed and cracked, and all the marrow extracted therefrom, ten to one that you sigh, hang your head and tail, and retire into a corner. I don't know why this is, of course, for I never tried the happiness that's to be got out of a bone ; but, perhaps, you find it less easy to digest than to crack, perhaps a splinter got into a hollow tooth and gave you a twinge ; anyhow you're far from happy, for you sigh, and sulk, and disappear into a corner, there to fall asleep, and dream, maybe, of bones that need no digesting, own no splinters, and leave behind no twinges or regrets. Now, I don't care for bones myself, as I said, but I'm no wiser or nearer happiness than you. You fondly believe that a bone can make you happy, and I—no, I can't tell you what my dream of happiness is."

He laid his hand carelessly over the dog's huge neck, and the look in the grey eyes deepened and saddened.

Mildred had come creeping nearer and nearer, closer and closer, as if jealous of the notice bestowed by Stephen upon his other companion. When he had ceased speaking she was very close indeed. He knew it, he felt the touch of her soft shoulder against his arm. His blood tingled, and he set his teeth hard. If she did not love him—love him as he longed to be loved by her—

why had she been thrown in his way? She put out her hand as if to touch him, and did touch him lightly with the tips of her fingers, then drew them back, and bent towards him, leaning down so as to look into his face.

"Woolfert would not understand you; tell it to me."

Her wondrous softness maddened him. What did it all mean? If anything but love, she was as cruel as she was soft.

"Tell it me," she repeated; and again the little fingers fell softly on his arm, then went stealing down to his hand, twining about it, and trying hard to pull it away from the face he was averting from her. "Have I made you angry?" and she looked at him with the half awed, half pitying look with which a child sees emotion in an elder.

"Yes."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to vex you; indeed I didn't! You are so good, and—don't turn away, please don't; you frighten me, and I can't bear it! Why won't you speak to me?"

"What would you have me say?" he broke out at last, turning upon her almost fiercely—"that I am a fool, a madman, an idiot——"

"Oh, no! Only what you wouldn't say to Woolfert, because he could not understand you."

"And you think you would understand me better?"

"I would try," she answered, very demurely, moving a little away, and folding her hands on her lap, in a gravely attentive attitude.

Stephen laughed, and felt half angry with himself for having taken so seriously anything connected with that childish creature.

"Well, why don't you speak?"

"Because you would not understand."

"Oh yes, I should; I feel almost sure that I should! Do you remember when you told me about your ideal sister of mercy. I understood that quite well."

"And thought I meant Miss Jane."

"She is so good, no one could be better."

"Would you like to hear about another of my ideals?"

"Oh yes!"

So eagerly spoken, with such a bright, wild look sent up at him from under the long lashes.

"Well, then, I'll tell you about my ideal love, shall I?"

A deep-drawn breath the only answer; but the folded hands clasped each other very tightly, and the pretty head drooped.

"Every one has had his ideal love. I have had mine; and, strange to say, though I am morally convinced that the goddesses of the ancients were tall, fine women—and I've a great veneration for the heathen goddesses—my ideal love was always a little creature—always. So much easier to carry about with you in your heart, you know; take a fine woman as an ideal, and you must hire a caravan for her transport. No, my ideal love was always a winsome wee thing, great eyed, soft and tender, for I had moulded her character, as her features, to suit my taste.

She must be sensible, and busy, and active, ready and competent to help me in my profession—she must not be demonstrative or passionate, I said, but affectionate, in a quiet, matronly way, for a hard-working professional man has but little time to give to love and its jealous exactions.

The girl's eyes were being once more slowly lifted to his face, but as he turned sharply round they were dropped.

"I could say all that then, because my little love was nothing more to me than a pleasant picture, a dainty miniature to be looked at, admired, then laid aside. But she quite satisfied me until——"

"Until what?" asked Mildred, the look of awe stealing back into her face, for something in the man's tone startled and impressed her.

"Until having found my ideal love, I went mad." Stephen knew that it was all up with him; and reckless of consequences, led on by the resistless impulse of the moment, he resolved to have done with it once for all, to have his say, and get his answer from the girl's lips, or eyes, or cheek—good or bad, life or death, he was utterly reckless of consequences.

"Until my ideal love came to me as a living, breathing woman, and then because I knew that she could never be anything to me, that I could never make her understand or love me, that I should never see in her eyes or trembling about her lips the look that could alone satisfy me, the thought of her drove me mad, and I wished

that I had never looked upon her face, that there were no such being as my little love in all the world. Oh, child, child, I wish you could understand all this," he continued, covering the passion-working face with the big strong hands, hiding it away in very shame of his own weakness. "I wish you could! but you can't, and you never will, so it's of no use talking about it."

She had risen and stood before him. He could hear her quick irregular breathing; he felt the stealing fingers once more upon his arm. He let them so wander awhile, then suddenly, almost roughly, he seized the little hand into his burning grasp, and bent his face down upon it.

"I tried not to care for you, for I knew from the first that you could never be anything to me, that it would have been better, how much better, that we had never met. You're good and gentle, and you don't mean to be cruel. I know that, but you could never make me happy, and I won't be made unhappy by you! God knows I've suffered enough in my life without that!" So saying, with a sudden gesture almost of rage, he flung from him the hand that he had taken to himself and held so closely, first crushing it in the intensity of his passion.

Mildred said nothing. She only raised the hand thus ill-treated, and looked at it long and pityingly. Was it pity for the shrinking flesh that had been bruised in the man's jealous passion—or for herself, or for him with whose tears the little hand was still wet?

He rose to go. He hardly knew what he had

said. He feared he had been unjust and cruel, but what was said was said, there could be no recalling it.

"You are going?" she asked, covering the wounded hand over with the other as if to hide it, and holding them both up to her bosom. "Why wont you let me understand you if it would make you happy?"

Stephen laughed as if in mockery of himself and her.

"I tell you that you could never make me happy, and you could never understand me. Can you understand a love that you would give ten years of your life to get rid of, a love that should make you happy, and that only drives you mad. Do you understand what it is to feel wickedly, shamefully jealous of the past, of every look, every word, every thought——"

"Yes, yes," broke in Mildred, almost eagerly, "I understand."

Who would not have laughed at such a confession spoken by such lips?

"You jealous, you good, gentle, innocent child, and of whom, pray? of papa, or sister Jane?"

"Of papa or Jane?—oh no."

"Of whom, then?"

No answer.

"Of whom were you ever jealous?"

Still no answer, unless indeed a blush might be taken as such, but this Stephen could not see, for perfectly, painfully conscious of it for the first time, she had turned her face away.

"Of whom were you ever jealous, Mildred? Of some one you knew at Beddington?"

The question was only a whisper this time, for passion has no language but that of whispers. And again the red flush came mounting up over brow and cheek, and again he bent upon her the dark passion-filled eyes, trying to read her face. That face was very pale now, no response in cheek or eye, none that he saw at least, for the eyes were downcast, and saw nothing but the waving grass and wee flowerets at her feet.

"Some one you knew at Beddington?"

Still only a whisper, but how stern a one. He little knew how stern, for the old jealous suspicions were maddening him once more.

"Yes, I knew him even there," the girl answered musingly, with a faint rapturous smile and blush that came and went, making her thrill and tremble. "Even there." And lower drooped her head, lower and lower, and the eyes beneath their veiling lids could no longer see the waving grass or flowerets at her feet, because of the great tears that filled them. Would they fall? With a sudden gesture she flung herself on the ground between Woolfert and the master who had been so rough and unkind to her, and throwing her arms, those soft white arms that the loose muslin sleeve left uncovered, about the brute's shaggy neck, laid her face down upon it. Well might she hide it away from him, Stephen thought, ashamed of the blush and tears that the mere reference to that other love had called forth. Was it a blush of shame? Were they tears of

regret? What was that to him? Fool that he was to care for her tears or for her either.

He sprang to his feet and called off the dog—
“Woolfert, Woolfert!”

The hound had never disobeyed the master’s voice. The soft clinging arms were roughly shaken off, and sank down upon the grass, the tear-stained face along with them.

So Stephen left her on the day that in her innocent, childish light-heartedness she had called so happy.

CHAPTER VI.

though quite a fashionable little to offer in the way of people did not go there but for health; and were, indeed, with its fine air, fine scenery, and fine army bathing. When, however, a chance of excitement chanced, say, a second-rate concert, a play, or conjuror, or popular

carefully accepted, and patro-

since any excitement, even of that kind, had rejoiced the hearts of the people, when the rumour spread that Arden Graemes was to preach in the great meadow at the end of the road, the Badestonites nodded and said, "All right, we

are not much in your line, Mrs. Merryth, the Rector's wife, with her dark, grave face and her dark hair, like Cullan. "Not much, but if I were you I should go, out of curiosity, to see him myself, and

wouldn't miss the opportunity for a hundred pounds. The Rector may shake his head, and inveigh against field-preaching; he wont keep me away, I can tell him—I shall be there, and so must you. The great Arden Graemes, only think!" And off bustled the little woman, the best recruiting sergeant going.

Left alone, Mrs. MacCullan continued her walk with a slow step, and heavy, clouded brow. Was it the vulgar flippant remarks of her late companion that had so ruffled her? Certainly not, they had but awakened a certain train of thought which had been troubling her of late, far more than she would have cared to own, even to herself.

During all the best years of her life Stephen's mother had lived not only without sermons, which would have been a matter of but little importance, but without the religion they are supposed to teach; and what is more, she had never felt the need of it; or if she had at times felt that something was wanting to her life, she had banished the thought as idle, giving it any name but the right. It could not be what men called religion that was missing, she would say to herself; the hard, cold forms that had so wearied her in the dull, stiff, Presbyterian home where she had spent her youth, and from whose harsh restraints she had broken loose at an early age, to begin a new life as a free, rational being, in the great London world. In that world she had, of course, found everything a brilliant deception, life itself but a succession of

showy pictures, seen through the aid of the magic-lantern of fashion, the reality ignored, its shadow only looked at. But who cares that the reality of that fair-seeming shadow is but a poor, worthless daub ; magnified and embellished by the false light thrown upon it, it becomes an attractive spectacle, and men gaze, admire, and applaud. And so they should, for has not the artist done his best to make a fair show out of but scant materials ? He may be somewhat of a cheat, but not more, nay, not half as much so as nine-tenths of his audience ; for his aim is but to please, and not take in, with his ingenious shadows, whilst the one aim of society is not only to make shadows play the part of realities, but to make the world believe them such in very fact. Yes, society is a monster imposition, nor would we care to see it anything else. It is but the mere plaything of time, and what is time itself but a cheat like the rest, the shadow cast by eternity, whose rights it would arrogate to itself. A shadow, yes, nothing more, eternity the reality, time its shadow ; and in this shadow we live and move, and have our being. We play like little children, at buying and selling, marrying and giving in marriage, at being fine gentlemen and ladies, each one trying to outvie the other in the exciting game ; and, meanwhile, for each the shadow shortens, until nothing is left but the six feet allowed unto all ; and then, stopping suddenly short in our game, we fall to the earth, covering with our prostrate form those six

feet, for we at last stand face to face with the great reality of which time is but the shadow ; stand in the full blaze of eternity, with its light around us, the light in which we would not believe, because we dared not.

Frances MacCullan, though a very clever woman, played with the rest at buying and selling, visiting, courting, shining. That the society, of which she was so brilliant a star, was false and hollow, a thing of appearances only, she found quite natural, and the conviction that it was so made her none the less eager for its applause. No one ever despised it more, or lived for it more exclusively. Its mere empty forms she found irksome enough at times, but there's no getting on without them, she would say, with a careless shrug of the shoulders—empty forms where all was emptiness ! But that men should dare reduce to hollow forms the mysteries of the great Unknown, chaining the soul down to childish rules and ordinances, altogether revolted her ardent, impetuous nature. Disgusted with the repellent doctrines of her childhood, her marriage was the turning point in her life. The man she married, the first person she had ever really loved, was an atheist and a scoffer—that decided her ; it was so much easier to believe nothing than all ; and faith was a thing altogether superfluous in the brilliant circle of *esprits forts* and free-thinkers among whom she now lived. When at last came shame, losses, and death, when the man she had loved so for his brilliant wit, left behind him

a dishonoured name, and a memory of which no woman could be proud, when the world for which she had lived turned its back upon her; or at least when, to avoid coming to extremities, she saw herself forced to turn her back upon it; when in the solitude of absolute retirement she had full leisure for sober reflection; doubts, many and bitter, would at times arise to trouble her. She could not help asking herself why she was glad, oh, how glad, that her son had other views than those of herself and his father; and yet this very difference was as an impassable gulf, separating them, their interests, and their life. At first, longing for some useful, active occupation to fill up her thoughts and time, she had asked, quite humbly, to be allowed to help the doctor-son, as the little cousins were helping him now, and he had refused her aid, gently, but firmly—it could not be.

She knew why, and the subject was not again broached between them, but she had brooded over it in secret, and more and more did she realize that something was wanting to her life—something that would make her happier, more worthy to be the friend and counsellor of the son for whom alone she now lived.

Day by day she grew more restless, more dissatisfied. What had she of the life that had promised so well? the past a delusion, the present a blank, the future—how could she dare look forward? for the atheist there is but the—*to-day*.

When the Rector's gossiping little wife said

that the celebrated Arden Graemes was to preach the following day in Highcliffe meadow, the words awoke no wish to go and hear him, but they awoke the old restless pain at her heart. "Faith must exist," she mused, "and the things faith teaches, or it would not be a natural craving of the human heart. If made for time we should be satisfied with it, and have no longing for anything beyond. If we have an instinctive hankering after truth—it must exist—for the mind could not seize what had never been. Truth exists therefore—but where? Not in the world in which I once lived, not even in the interests and affections of earth, for the fact of their being so short-lived, even the truest of them, proves them the things of time, not eternity, and if in life is given to us some feeling stronger than the rest, we at once bestow on it the attribute of infinity, and cry, 'It will last for ever.' Again the conviction of the soul speaking to the human heart."

Frances MacCullan could reason well, but she could not believe. Pondering upon many things, thoughtful and troubled, she reached her favourite seat in the rock—the seat where she and Jane had first conversed together on that bright winter morning; and absent and preoccupied, she was about to sit down, when a form hitherto concealed by the projections of the cliff, passed swiftly and silently before her.

A queer, uncanny figure it was, boyish of form, pale and solemn of feature; the clothes coarse, ill-fitting, and ill-matched; the head bare, and

billowy masses of red hair descending on to the high, stooping shoulders. It was an apparition to inspire at first ridicule, and then awe. Breaking in thus suddenly and unexpectedly upon her gloomy train of thought, it startled her not a little.

His gait shambling and uncertain, his gaze fixed straight on beyond, he passed before her, then stopped short, turned, and fixed on the astonished woman a pair of eyes that, great, wide open, and full of a strange burning light, thrilled her as she had perhaps never been thrilled before. Still looking at her he slowly raised one arm, and pointed it in the direction of her home.

"Your past lies there," he cried, in a voice which, though low, was startlingly distinct, "and your future—here," pointing onward and upward with a wild, sweeping gesture. "To each comes the appointed hour. I saw you in a vision of the night standing where two roads meet, and one stood beside you in form like unto the Son of Man, but your eyes were holden that you should not see Him. Then said I, 'Lord, who shall open the eyes of this woman that she may know Thee—the Truth?' And the Lord put a word into my mouth, and that Word you shall hear!"

The hands dropped, the mesmeric gaze was withdrawn, and suddenly as the man appeared he vanished, and Frances MacCullan was left alone, stunned, bewildered, looking out over the waving line of beach, scarce able to realize, in the first shock of surprise, that it was indeed a living man

who had stood and spoken to her, and not rather the phantom of her own excited imagination. What added yet more to the sense of unreality was the conviction that she had looked into some such face, into some such eyes before ; where, in a dream—in some other world—in the common walk of life, she could not tell ; but the conviction was strong.

CHAPTER VII.



TAKEN my advice, eh? Come for the fun of the thing? And quite right too; it's not every day we can hear something new, more especially in the way of preaching. Why, bless you, I know all the dear Rector's sermons by heart, could preach them myself without notes as well as he, and better too, for his delivery's not the best part of him, poor dear man." And Mrs. Merryth laughed, just as if she had said something witty; then catching sight of a more congenial spirit hurried off, and Mrs. MacCullan, glad to be rid of her, slowly raised her glass to her eyes, for she was shortsighted, and the preacher at some little distance. Yes, of course, it was just as she had supposed, Arden Graemes the field preacher, it was, who had accosted her. How he had chanced to hit upon the right thing to say, was a mystery still; but she had read such wonders of his prophetic gifts, and the miracles of conversion effected by him, that she wondered less than she might otherwise have done. No doubt, thought she to herself, he says much the same to every one; and the aroused conscience sees inspiration in the words that chance to be so applicable. She could reason well, could Frances MacCullan;

and it was in a very reasoning mood she now prepared herself to listen to Arden Graemes's sermon.

The fame of his eloquence being so great she quite expected to enjoy a fine piece of oratory—but never having heard him, she could in no way be prepared for his preaching, which was as unlike anything else of the kind as the running brooklet is unlike the seething ocean in a storm. Prejudiced, and sceptical too in no slight degree, she yet felt herself irresistibly compelled to take his words to herself; he seemed to be preaching to her, and to her alone, laying her whole life bare before her, not clothed in terror, but covered over with the solemn shroud of regret. “If thou hadst known, even thou at least in this thy day the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.” And the woman's heart echoed the cry of the preacher. Whatever might be the things which belong unto peace she certainly had not known or tried to know them, and now they were hid from her!

But there was no time for sober reflection just then, she could but hold in her breath and listen, whilst thought upon thought, image upon image, plea upon plea, swept over her soul in a resistless torrent, driving before it every lingering doubt like chaff before the wind.

She tried to keep calm—to collect her thoughts, to keep her feelings under control; but there was no withstanding the force of that frenzied eloquence. How could she remain cold when passion shook the preacher's frame, brought the

sweat of mental agony to his brow, and the tears to his eyes? Seeing, hearing, she could not but believe that there was something more in his words than a mere empty form. "Could he be so terribly in earnest, believing the cause he advocated to be anything less than the truth?"

What a mighty resistless power lies in the gift of eloquence. One man inspiring the multitude—one mind forcing the many against their will to adopt its views, its convictions—the live spark kindling into life the dead, senseless mass. A glorious and a dangerous gift, truly! Through it kingdoms have been made and unmade, and its influence for good or evil is stupendous.

As Frances MacCullan walked home that day, choosing the least frequented paths, for society of any kind would just then have been intolerable to her, she felt like one walking in a dream, one whose whole life had been but a dream, from which she was now trying hard to awake. Every now and then she would stop short, pass her hand over her eyes, then look around as if seeking some familiar object upon which to fix her attention, that the strange sense of unreality might pass away. But though she had visited the same scenes almost daily, nothing appeared familiar. A certain stern solemnity pervaded all, and an unnatural silence seemed to have fallen upon the earth, as if nature herself were pausing spell-bound to await her decision. Her eyes turned from earth to the heavens of which he had spoken with such mystic, solemn rapture; heavy, storm-laden clouds covered it like a pall.

"There's a storm in the air," she said, glad to be thus able to account for the strange feelings that oppressed her. "Yes, we shall certainly have a storm."

She had now reached the spot where Arden Graemes had so brusquely accosted her the day before, and now glancing along the beach she almost expected to see him appear once more. Too restless and agitated to go home at once, she sat down, and leaning her chin on her hand, and her elbow on her knee, sent her dark, troubled gaze out over the waters. They, too, spoke of storm, great foaming billows swelling on towards the rocks with a sullen roar. Turn which way she might all seemed to participate in her present mood; all nature was moved and troubled—the spirit of the storm above, around, and within her.

After the storm a calm! Could the real calm of faith ever fall upon her life? "Oh, that I could believe!" she murmured, for the old tormenting doubts and fears were beginning once more. "One moment all seemed so clear, and now—if I could but grasp the certainty once for all."

For more than an hour she sat lost in anxious musings; and unable to come to any clear decision she resolved to see and speak with Arden Graemes once again before he left. On her return home she sent for him.

Worn-out with the passionate fervour of that morning's preaching, with the oppressive heat of the day, with the utter sleeplessness of the

two previous nights, spent in the open fields in lonely prayer and meditation, Arden Graemes had fallen asleep; and there, in the shabby, horsehair chair, in the squalid parlour of the little cottage where they had found a shelter—he and the woman who ministered to him—he now rested, of whom not only all Badestone, but all the world was talking—the great preacher, prophet, saint. Little recked he of what the world said of him, he was weary, and he slept—so deeply, so peacefully; the thin, frail hands, delicate as those of a woman, folded on the open Bible that lay in his lap; the bright, light-waving hair—which some hours before Rhoda had combed and brushed out with so much care, but so little pride in its wondrous beauty—falling softly down either side of his face—that face as white and wan and fixed in its deep repose as the face of the dead. Now that the eyes were closed, it was no longer wild, but pure and tranquil as that of a little child, so fair and smooth the brow half hidden beneath the shining curls, so sweet the wandering smiles about the pale, parted lips.

In the window Rhoda sat at work, never glancing up from it, except when from time to time she turned an anxious look upon the sleeper. By-and-bye there was a knock at the door, and stealing noiselessly across the sanded floor she opened it, took from the servant's hand a card, read it, then glanced at the motionless figure in the chair, and back wistfully at the girl's face.

"He's so tired," she said, apologetically, "I

couldn't bear to awake him. He has not slept at all these two nights, and he needs rest so much. Will you tell your mistress that he's asleep, and I hadn't the heart to awake him ; but he never sleeps for long, and he'll be sure to call to-day, quite sure."

The girl retired, and Rhoda returned to the window, and watched how the clouds went sweeping across the sky, and how the storm gathered over the sea, heaving and convulsing it. Then she resumed her work, and so passed another hour, and still Arden slept on, and in his sleep he smiled.

At last the blue eyes opened wide and solemn, not wild yet, only solemn.

"You've had a nice long sleep. I hadn't the heart to awake you."

"It's so good to sleep when you are weary," he answered, dreamily, "to feel the slow down-dropping of the aching lids—a start, a thrill, a quiver, and you sleep and forget. It will be so good when the end comes to drop off thus to sleep, knowing that there is no awaking, for the worn-out frame at least."

"You have been asked for, dear ; a servant was here with a card ; her mistress wishes to see you, but I had not the heart to awake you."

She half expected a reproof, but he only rose and moved to the door, the Bible still clasped in the hands which had closed and folded over it as he awoke. Rhoda followed him.

"How oppressive the day is," she said as they walked along towards Rockstone, the heavy sultry

air wrapping them about, "we shall have a storm. If only we get back in time," and she looked anxiously at her companion, then out over the sea, as Mrs. MacCullan had done some hours before, and saw how it heaved and swelled, moving on towards the rocks with a sullen roar.

"How angry it looks!" she could not help exclaiming.

Arden did not answer, he was muttering to himself of holy mystic things, for he was in one of his quiet moods, not wild or mad at all.

When they first entered the Rockstone drawing-room Mrs. MacCullan was too much agitated to notice that Arden Graemes was not alone; when she at last became aware of the fact that a tall shabbily-dressed woman was standing at the door, pressing up against it as if but too well aware that she was an intruder, she turned upon her a look of haughty inquiry; then suddenly remembering that the maid had mentioned having spoken with a lady who must have been either his wife or sister, she checked the impulse to ask what was her business, and only looked an inquiry.

The woman evidently saw and understood the look, for she shrank yet more into herself and said hurriedly—

"I will wait outside if you like—I only accompanied him—he did not know the way."

Something in the tone, so subdued, so humble, something too in the look of the large dark eyes so preternaturally large, shining forth from the sunken orbits, and contrasting so painfully with

the sharp sallow features, made her answer a gentle and courteous one.

"Pray take a seat."

And the woman sank, without another word, into the nearest chair, and, huddled up in her shawl, disappeared almost completely from view ; so that the lady of the house soon ceased to think of her, and became unconscious of her presence.

What Frances MacCullan had to say to Arden Graemes was said in a few words.

"I would not believe, and now that I would, I can't. The more I try to reason and understand, the darker does everything grow !"

"Yes, darkness is the twin brother of unbelief !" Arden said, as if to himself ; and rising he left her, went to the window, and stood there looking out with absent far-off gaze. "We live in the light of the sun, but the sun itself is a mystery to us ; we feel its warmth, it is life and health to us, but we cannot look up into it with the naked eye ; we know not what it is, and, therefore, in our petulant pride we turn our backs upon it, and do not or will not see that the farther we go, the darker grows our path."

She felt that what he said was true ; she had turned her back upon the light in the wilful pride of discontent, and had been groping on in darkness ever since.

"I would believe !" she cried, almost passionately ; "I want something to lean upon more satisfying, more hope-inspiring than reason ; I am so tired of this ceaseless struggle with myself, and long for rest and peace."

"Don't talk of peace to-day," he broke in, excitedly; "peace lies in the smiling valleys where the meek and lowly make their homes; here the spirit of the storm is abroad—the sun whose noonday light could not satisfy the daring soul is darkened in the heavens, clouds and storm hang between it and earth, and the voice of the storm, which is the cry of earthly passions that cannot rise as rises the voice of love and prayer, but falls again to earth startling the souls of men with its wild wail of anguish, sounds amid the darkness. Hark!"

A wild gust of wind, rising suddenly where there had previously not been a breath of air, came sweeping round the house, tearing at the windows as if to force an entrance, and bending the tall trees in its fury.

Mrs. MacCullan, awed and trembling, leant against the wall.

The preacher turned upon her his burning looks, and when he spoke it was almost in a whisper.

"The storm of adversity swept over your home, bowing your pride as it bends the proud summit of yon trees rejoicing in their strength, scattering your fairest hopes as the leaves lie scattered before the blast; the hour of vengeance had come, but not the hour of mercy—the Lord was not in the wind!"

A moment's pause—then a flash, vivid, blinding, rent the heavens, and lighted up with lurid glare the weird white face of the preacher, the pale awe-struck features of his convert, and the

bowed motionless form crouching in the distant corner, still huddled up in her shawl. That red awful light—and then the crashing thunder right over the house, shaking it to its very foundation.

Mrs. MacCullan uttered an involuntary exclamation, and drew back.

“No, no!” cried Arden, turning sharply round upon her with outstretched arms and wild, inspired looks. “Keep your proud, defiant attitude to the last, no need to bow your head before the time—the earthquake and the fire—the mountains rent and the earth shaken to its centre, but the stubborn pride of man remains unbent! Only the voice of God Himself can bring the recreant soul to His feet, and He is not in the earthquake or the fire. But I see what you cannot see, and I hear what you cannot hear—the silent approach of Mercy! Down on your knees now, woman—the God whose presence you invoke—is here!”

And impressed, bewildered, scarce knowing what she did, Frances MacCullan sank to her knees, her head bent low even to the earth. Above her, his arms extended, his face illumined with a strange unearthly light, stood Arden Graemes, and on the silence of the room—on the silence of that one thrilled and listening heart—seemed to fall a whisper soft and low as the breath of the summer breeze, floating in through the windows, and appearing to the woman’s excited fancy to fill the air with sound, then dying away soft and sudden as it had arisen.

“God in the still small voice of conscience,”

said the preacher. "The hour has come." The uplifted hands descended slowly, hovered awhile over the bowed head as if in blessing ; then he turned and left the room.

Without a word, the woman who had accompanied him there rose too, and followed him.

For awhile Arden walked slowly on in abstracted silence ; then as he reached the corner, and the storm took him, he tossed his hands above his head with a sharp sound as of pain, and started off at a furious rate. And the woman, though so weary, and finding it hard to battle in weakness and fatigue against the driving wind, kept up with him, close and faithful as his shadow. Where was he going ? Not home, and they both so much needed rest. "Arden," she cried, catching at his sleeve, and gasping for breath, "not that way, you are tired, and the storm is coming on ; let us go home."

"Home," he echoed, stopping short, arrested by the one word. "Yes, Rhoda, home. The two ends of life meeting at last, and the watchword of both the same—home. Between the two homes how much of sorrow and sin. Such a long, long, weary way, on and on where the shadows lead. But where the end meets the beginning, the circle of life is complete, and both cease ; for Eternity has neither beginning nor end, and the magic circle which enclosed a life is the emblem of that eternity which created, perfected, then claims it for its own. As we advance nearer and nearer to the end, the sounds of earth and of the present grow fainter and fainter, and

the voices of the lost home blending with those of the home to which we are going, fill our hearts and ears. Those voices are in my ear now; they blend with the sigh of the wind, with the music of the sea, and they all say, 'Come.' And I am so weary, and would so gladly go, but the ransom has not been paid. The ransom of one life, a thousand souls! and the voices still cry, 'Come,' and I long to go. One more soul given to my prayers. Is not the number yet complete?"

"You save more souls every time you preach than you can ever know of," said the woman by his side, feeling instinctively that he needed comfort; "but God knows them all. He has counted, and He knows them."

"He which converteth a sinner from the error of his ways shall save a soul from death, and shall cover——"

"A multitude of sin," suggested the woman once more; for he had paused as if uncertain of the concluding words.

"A multitude of sin—a multitude of sin," he repeated, with a certain trembling eagerness; and the pain-contracted features relaxed their tension. "The shout of a thousand ransomed souls covering the cry of blood that calls from the earth." He paused, shivered, then pressing his hand to his side, coughed the deep, hollow cough that makes the warm living heart tremble and bleed as it hears.

Rhoda looked at him anxiously. He was miserably clad, having nothing on but the thin threadbare summer coat. It had been oppressively warm

when they left home, but the storm-laden wind now blowing over the sea, was cold and piercing. He must feel it so, she thought, or he would not have shivered. Without a word she took off her own shawl, and threw it over him, wrapping it carefully about his chest. He let her do so, offering neither opposition nor thanks ; he seemed scarcely aware of the silent action, but by-and-by he turned to her with the faint childish smile playing about his lips.


"It's so good, Rhoda, so warm. It was so cold before, and—and it hurt me so, but the pain's not so hard to bear, not half so hard—now that I feel warm."

The poor, thin, trembling hand was still pressed to his side, and he spoke through heavy convulsive breathings.

"I'm glad you're warm, dear."

He did not notice how she shivered and shook, or how she huddled herself together, straining her arms about her shrinking form, that she might at least fancy herself covered, and not feel quite so cold.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAT same day, Stephen possessed as it would seem, like his mother, by the spirit of the storm, found it impossible to stay quietly anywhere. As to remaining at home to write or study, that was out of the question. His interview with Mildred the day before had left him in a restless, unsettled state of mind. He felt that they could never again be to each other what they had been—friends and cousins. His rash words had put an effectual stop to the pleasant intimacy with which she at least had been so well satisfied. How would she meet him now—how could he meet her? A sense of actual dread was upon him—dread of the consequences of his folly. Perhaps he had frightened her, and she would leave the place so as to avoid any future meeting. And if she did—what if she did—if she were to pass out of his life as he had once wished her to do? This and a hundred other questions had he asked himself within those last few hours.

When he came down to breakfast, his mother noticed his pale absent looks, but dared not remark upon them, being of too proud and reserved a nature herself not to respect the

reticence of another, or to force a confidence even from her own son.

The meal having been got through somehow, with the assistance of the *Times*, behind which he hid the disturbed countenance, he told her he should not be back until the evening, and not waiting to be questioned he rode off. He was just in the mood to ride hard, and get as far away as possible from the place where she was, and where at any moment he might meet with her; for angry enough with himself, he was still more angry with her for having led him on to make a fool of himself.

An hour's ride would bring him to a village where he had several patients, and to them he proposed paying a round of visits, to while away the time; taking the Esplanade also on his way back.

The day was close and sultry, heavy clouds lay dark and low, and there was in the air a stillness that could be felt—all nature seemed in a state of expectancy—listening, waiting, and the Doctor, though not given to idle imaginings, could not shake off a vague sense of something impending. At every step he grew more feverishly restless, longing to get away, far away, from home; then longing yet more intensely to get back, fearing to meet again the woman to whom he had betrayed his love, without hope of a return, yet fearing still more what might be going on in his absence.

Not many hours before, he had left Mildred lying along the ground with but the one wish

throbbing at his heart, that he might never look upon her face again ; and now, as if in fulfilment of that wish, the image that had before been vivid as reality itself, so tantalizingly vivid sometimes, the little face peeping out at him from every corner of his room, bending over his study chair, obtruding itself between him and his work, haunting him continually, now as a whole, now piecemeal, a pair of great wild wistful eyes flashing right down into his, then vanishing, leaving him all thrilled—a pair of full soft, smiling lips with a tremulous quiver about them as if longing to say something—the one thing that would make him happy !—a wee caressing hand, a vision of pale gold-gleaming hair—the one vision only, always the one, his life now held no other ; and that vision seemed all at once to have receded from his view, growing as faint and indistinct as if years instead of hours had parted them. He could no longer see her, and when he tried to realize her he could not. It was as though she had altogether vanished out of his life according to his reckless wish.

And so is it sometimes in the first hour of bereavement ; the face so long familiar, and which memory will make familiar to us once more, vanishes suddenly and completely ; we try with passionate longing to recall a look, a gesture, and failing altogether, we for the first time realize how entirely the dead is lost to us and our love.

“ Bah ! ” exclaimed Stephen, shaking himself angrily, and urging on his horse. “ She doesn’t

care enough about me to leave the place for my sake, and if she did, it would perhaps be the best thing that could happen to me after all. Ten to one if she even understood my words, with her thoughts full of that other fellow; poor little thing, I'm sorry I made her cry—I should have been more gentle. Who knows whether she might not have been induced to confide to me her whole love-story, if only I had invited her confidence? But that may be yet. I shall know how to be more guarded for the future."

The future—why did the words, though only uttered in thought, ring out so strange and ominous? The vague sense of something impending was haunting Stephen still, try as he might to shake it off.

"Not see her again, indeed—her face will probably be the very first I shall see on getting home, smiling out her welcome from the corner into which she always creeps, like a mouse into his hole, and she'll look as bright and happy as if nothing had passed between us. It isn't a rough word would trouble her for long; poor child, I'm afraid I wasn't over civil or gentle to her; but she's forgotten all by this time, she's such a good little thing, and after all it's only those you love who can make you suffer. She'll find it easy enough to forgive cousin Stephen for having been a little rough—cousin Stephen! who might just as well be brother Stephen; who can be liked and flattered, and nestled up to, and confided in, without any fear of danger."

And on and on Stephen urged his horse,

whilst at every step the air grew heavier, the heavens darker, the feeling of oppression stronger.

The patients were visited one after the other, rich and poor, old and young, and Stephen tried hard to give them his best attention, and stifle the ceaseless cry at his heart. "Oh! child, child, why can you not love me as I love you, and so put an end to all this misery?"

"You'd best ride home pretty sharp, doctor," said a stout, apron-adorned, grocer patient, as he followed Dr. MacCullan to his shop-door. "We shall have a fine storm by-and-by, and you'll find it pretty tough work keeping up against the gale, I'm thinking."

A sudden and violent gust blew the cap from his head, and when, having at last succeeded in recovering it and his breath, he looked round, the rider had disappeared round the corner.

According to the grocer's advice Stephen rode on at as sharp a pace as the gathering storm would allow of. A lonely ride, with the wind dead against you, and thunder, lightning, and rain for company, is no very agreeable prospect, and Stephen felt a very great desire to be safe back.

"The storm will keep her at home, at least, that's one good thing, so I may return without any fear of a meeting. The best thing for me would be never to look upon her face again."

Still the same cruel wish so often repeated, never again to look upon the pretty, soft, little face, so wondrously soft always, when turned upon him.

"Ah, there's the village, we shall soon be home now—by Jove!"

A sudden rending of the heavens, and a lightning flash, vivid, blinding, startling both horse and horseman into an unwonted display of feeling. "By Jove!" cried the latter, and Adamant gave a wild backward spring, which would have unhorsed many another man; but Adamant's master was not to be unseated thus easily. A moment's anxious pause, then the crushing thunder peal, and the sweeping clouds, and the driving storm, and horse and rider, bending to the blast, making for home at their utmost speed. Along the cliffs, and down the hill into the village, past the terrace, where Mildred lived; but Stephen, his head bent down to the horse's neck, did not see it, or the figure of a woman running as if for her life, on and on, until stopping short, arrested by the sound of the horse's hoofs, she recognised him.

"Mr. MacCullan—Mildred—for God's sake!"

It was Jane Graves.

He bent down to her from the saddle.

"Mildred! good God, what of her?"

"I—I don't know—she's not at home—or—or—at Rockstone, and Penryth saw her going along the beach—to—Giant's Head, and the storm's coming on and the tide's rising, and she's not at home!"

Jane wrung her hands and gasped for breath; for the storm was in her very teeth, and she had to raise her voice almost to a scream that it might reach him.

"Along the beach, to Giant's Head, in this weather, this storm, impossible!"

"He saw her, he said so, and tried to put in his boat to warn her, but he couldn't, and the beach is covered, and—and she's not at home—oh, what shall I do?"

There was such despairing agony in the tone that the man's heart would have bled for the weak, helpless creature before him, even if Mildred had not been to him what she was. Now, his one thought was for the woman he loved. He had already dismounted, and flung the reins over the horse's neck. He might be trusted to return alone, and if not, what mattered it?

"Send some one to my mother, she might be frightened," he said, in a hoarse whisper; for even in that hour of supreme dread the mother's love was respected.

"I will go and look for her!" Saying this, he laid his hand upon her arm, pressing it to pain, then turned and left her.

She followed, but at every step the storm drove her back, and she was as weak to battle against it as he was strong. He was soon out of sight.

Standing in the shelter of the rock, half-way down the beach, Penryth was looking anxiously out along the cliffs, against which the storm lashed, and the sea dashed and leapt.

"She was further on, further on than that," he muttered, gravely shaking his head, "further on to the side of the Head—the tide's beating agin' them rocks pretty sharp now, and if she ain't home by this time, which I'm pretty sure

she ain't, she'll never get home at all—whew, what a storm! Well, it's no good looking out either, for if she ain't safe she's done—ha! you here, sir?"

"You haven't seen her?"

The man shook his head. "If she ain't safe home, sir, it's not one of us'll ever see her again, for——"

But the sentence was not finished, for he was seized by the collar, and shaken as is a mouse in a cat's jaws.

"You saw that she was in danger and made no effort to save her, and she's out there still, you're sure of it!"

He need not have asked the question, feeling so sure, so sure that she was out there, far out among the rocks, exposed to the fury of the storm, to danger, to death.

"A boat!" he cried, pitching his voice high, for the roar of the wind and waves carried the words out of his mouth. "If she's to be saved it can only be by boat, there's no return any other way—will you come with me?"

Still the man shook his head. "Too late, sir, the rocks is all covered by this time, and it's no boat could keep up agin such a storm, it's sartin death one way or other."

"Any reward you choose to ask for if you follow me—*any* reward, do you hear? It's a matter of life and death, and only a coward would hold back."

"It's a matter of death, sure and sartin; no boat could keep up with that heavy sea running,

and the wind dead agin it," answered the man, doggedly. He had a wife and children, and an old blind mother, and what was Mildred Graves to him? Besides, he was no hero, nor was he a lover; the sacrifice of three lives instead of one seemed to him but a bad speculation. He would have done much for reward, more still to save the life of a fellow-creature, but the sacrifice of his own life was too much to ask of him.

Stephen uttered an exclamation which sounded like a curse upon the man's cowardice, then sped down the rocks to where a boat lay high and dry upon the shingles; with an almost superhuman effort he pushed it down to the sea, and sprang in. Something he must do to save, or die for her; which it was to be, seemed in that first moment of excitement a matter of but little importance.

"He's a dead man as sure as I'm alive!" groaned the man. "It isn't the boat 'ud keep up in such a sea. A pretty business—a pretty business, to be sure!"

And still he held the glass to his eye, feeling an unpleasant consciousness of having done something shabby, yet glad to be anywhere but on those cruel, murderous, raging waters.

Whew! how the boat spun round and round, and rocked up and down. "He's done for; I knew how it would be! No, by God! the boat has righted itself, and is pushing on in the direction of the Giant's Head." Thunder and lightning, and the fast falling rain, and Stephen bending to the oar, the storm in his ear, and the wild, deso-

late waste above and around him. That desolate waste of sea and sky, and grey mist-covered rocks, towards which his straining eyes were turned—nothing but that, not a living thing as far as the sight could reach. And yet he felt so sure that she was there, that, dead or alive, he should find her. Dead! The fisherman had said that it was too late—and they had parted in anger; and in his blind jealous rage he had almost cursed her, and wished that he might never look upon her face again—that pretty, soft, little face, so childish, so innocent, but which by its very beauty and innocence had so often made him unjust and cruel. What if he were never to look upon it again, or only—no, no, God was merciful, and love stronger than death! But the long line of rocks loomed out from the dreary waste of waters which dashed up against them, and no living thing was to be seen. He shouted, but there came no answer, no sound but the sullen roar of the still advancing tide, and the howling of the wind in his ear. Dead—dead! Who said that love is strong?—ay, strong in suffering, but how powerless against the decrees of fate!

Stephen's brain reeled, and the strength which had been nothing less than miraculous, suddenly and completely gave way; a shudder of exhaustion, intense even to agony, ran through his frame; the stiffening hands dropped from the oar to his side, and the boat caught by the wind drove off, back along the way he had made it come with such a deadly effort.

And he had believed that the strength of his love would carry him to her side wherever she might be. Strength, indeed! what was it all but miserable weakness? He had come but such a little way—such a little way—and he could no longer put out a hand to save her. She might be near; one struggle more and he might find her; and lo! the storm was driving him back along the way he had come. But that storm, as if in very pity of the man's momentary weakness, had suddenly abated; there was a lull, then came the lightning flash, and the answering thunder peal, and then—was it fancy, or had he really heard his name called—"Stephen! Stephen!"

The drooping head was raised, and the eyes over which a mist had gathered. He cast a wild, bewildered look around, like one startled from some hideous dream. Was it she who called him?

"Mildred! Mildred!"

The wind carried away the cry, but, as if in answer to it, on the point of a rock, half-way down the cliff immediately overhanging the sea, the spot of whose danger he had warned Mildred more than six months before, as we speak of danger to those for whom we care too little to take its possible risk much to heart—he saw her now, safe, and sheltered from the gale, standing as rapt and motionless as if sunlight instead of storm wrapped her about; as if there were no tempest-driven ocean raging at her feet, leaping upwards nearer and nearer, higher and higher, till it dragged her

down into its fatal embrace. Did she not see him? Did she not stretch out to him her arms, knowing that he had come to save her? No; her gaze was fixed far out at sea, and her hands were folded over her bosom.

“Wait for me. I’m coming!”

His voice could not reach her, for the wind carried it away, but the cry gave him back all the force of will that had momentarily deserted him. Having got thus far—having seen her—seen that she was safe and waiting for him, could he now miss the last few strokes that would bring him to her side? If he could but get the boat alongside the rock the rest would be easy, for he was a famous climber—if not! The wind was dead against him, the sea running mountains high. If not! He shook back the dripping hair from his flushed face. A fall over the boat’s side, a plunge into the waves, a few vigorous strokes of the despairing arms, and he would yet reach and die with her—united at last, with no wicked, jealous doubts to part them; the empty boat rocking gently on towards home, and straining horror-filled eyes looking far out to sea.

But the end had not come yet. He seized the oars, one brave struggle for the rock, the fearless breast against the pitiless blast and blinding spray, he had almost gained it, his outstretched hand had almost touched its edge, but the billow that had helped him on flung him wildly back. He could not see her now, but he knew that the tide had reached her—that its curling foam, the messenger of death, was playing

about her feet, kissing and caressing them; ten minutes more of life for her, of struggle for him.

"I shall do it yet!"

And he did it. Twenty times beaten back, twenty times he returned to the charge, and he did it. His foot was on the rock, and he was climbing it with the assistance of his right hand, the rope that held the boat being firmly grasped in the left. He had almost reached the ledge upon which Mildred stood—almost, but not quite, the length of the rope not allowing of his going further.

"Mildred," he cried out, "I am here. Come to me!"

He did not know if she had heard him, for he could not see her, the water dripping from his hair down over his face blinded him, and the surge, as if in anger at being thus robbed of its prey, was dashing him against the rocks, bruising and wounding him. There was a sharp ring of pain in the cry, physical as well as mental.

No answer to it, until the faint whisper at his side, "I am here;" and he had her in his arms, straining her to him with despairing passion.

"Put your arms about my neck, close, close about my neck," he gasped. "I shall feel stronger."

And the soft arms stole about him close and warm, and he felt stronger, as he had said.

How he got down to the boat over those surge-beaten rocks he could never afterwards have told. We sometimes, ay, the weakest of us, perform actions at which we afterwards marvel, and which

remain, even for ourselves, a lifelong mystery. And Stephen was strong—strong in his love and his despair.

He had got her safely in at last, and seated opposite to her he drew a deep breath, and looked up at the rock where she had stood waiting for death to come and fetch her, then down at her; then he passed his hand over his eyes pushing from them the heavy blood-clotted hair, and sighed, and resuming the oars rowed her back to life.

Not so fierce a struggle this time; the storm which had before hindered now assisted him, driving them on.

And whilst he rowed, Mildred sat quite still, her head drooped forward upon her breast, her hands tight writhed together lying in her lap. Neither of them spoke, until at last Stephen, looking up, said sharply, "You are cold"—for he had seen her shiver.

She did not answer, but she shivered again, and uttered a low murmur that sounded like a moan.

Dropping the oar, he stripped off his own coat and threw it to her.

"Wrap it about you."

She received it meekly at his hands, and stooping to pick it up, did as he had told her, almost hiding away beneath its heavy folds the small slight figure and little white woe-gone face.

So they rowed on towards land, the storm assisting and driving them forward.

Penryth still stood on the look-out, his glass to his eye, but he was not alone now; Mildred's

sister stood beside him in an agony of suspense, not daring to hope, not daring to fear.

"And you see nothing—nothing!"

"If only them clouds didn't hang so low down over the sea, and them rocks warn't just in the way. Maybe you'd like to look yourself, Miss?"

She tried to do so, to steady the shaking hand, the aching sight, but in vain.

"I see nothing, nothing," she cried, despairingly. "If only he would have waited and taken me with him."

She longed to be doing something, trying something; inaction at such a moment was agony intolerable.

"He wait indeed!" groaned the man; "he was off down the rocks and out to sea afore I could ha' said the Lord's Prayer. Maybe I'd have gone with him myself if he'd ha' waited."

For the man was still feeling very uncomfortable and sheepish and small; and more than half regretted the natural impulse that had made him shrink from danger.

"And you don't see anything—oh, don't you see anything?"

The same weary question a thousand times repeated; and Jane felt that if the suspense were to last much longer she must go mad.

What answer could be given but the evasive one of low-lying clouds and intercepting rock?—could he tell her that two lives were lost instead of one, that she would never again see her sister or the rash man who had thrown away his life in a mad attempt to save hers?

"If I could get to see behind them rocks, it's there she is. Eh!" He started, and turned the glass nearer home and more inland—muttered something inaudible, drew in his breath, then exclaimed.

"Eh, eh—it's herself, sure enough."

"Her, Mildred—oh, thank God—thank God!"

And down on her knees Jane went, thanking God in right good earnest; her heart upraised to heaven in trembling gratitude; but her eyes strained out over the sea—looking, looking.

Now, Penryth's *her* had not been intended for the young lady, but the boat; when, however, that turned the rocks and came into full view, when he could distinctly make out two human figures, the one rowing, the other huddled together at the farther end, he felt pretty sure that the other *her* was safe too, and he breathed more freely than he would have thought possible five minutes before.

"Ay, ay, it's her, and no mistake about it," he chuckled; "making straight for land, too. No need of a glass to see her now—eh, Miss?"

No, no need of a glass now. Jane saw her perfectly well, and the two figures in her; and she knew that Mildred was safe, and in a few minutes she would have her in her arms to coax and scold, and rejoice over, to her heart's content.

Both she and the fisherman were down at the foot of the rocks when the boat came in, Penryth wading in waist deep to give it a helping push.

When Jane first heard Mildred's voice lower

and more plaintive than she had ever perhaps heard it before, calling to her, she was seized with an almost resistless longing to give way, to utter a cry, and fall upon her neck, and have a good cry there; but battling bravely with the natural weakness she conquered it, and when Stephen, having lifted the girl out of the boat, placed her upon the rocks at her sister's side, all that sister gave in return for the precious life was a simple "Thank you," and as she put her arm about Mildred, she only whispered quietly—

"I was so frightened—I thought you were drowned."

"And so I should have been if he had not come to save me." Then throwing back her arms with a quick gesture, letting the cloak drop to her feet, she turned upon him.—"Why did you risk your life to save mine? Why did you save me, and bring me back to life when it was so easy to die?"

"And break the hearts of those who love you; for shame, Mildred Graves. May God forgive you the cruel, impious thought!"

The words were rough and stern; the voice how much more so, so pitiless because of the late agony of dread that lay all too plainly in it.

She shrank back, staggered as if struck by some sudden blow; dropped her head upon her breast, then extending her hands with an uncertain motion as if groping blindly for some means of support, fell heavily forward, received once more into Stephen's outstretched arms.

CHAPTER IX.



IT is really sad to think how much pleasurable excitement, how much food for social gossip, is lost through our not knowing what is going on around us. We flatter ourselves that we know more about our neighbours' concerns than they do themselves, and yet in very fact how little do we know. If we could but read the hidden secret of some few of the commonplace lives that cross ours on the world's high road, we should wonder awe-struck whether there be any life that has not its sacred mystery; and we should pass on our way with bated breath and walk on tiptoe, fearing to set our foot too roughly upon some spot that memory has consecrated to itself.

The reason that we have so little real interest in our fellow-creatures is that we know so little about them. Many details, indeed, we have got off by heart. We know to a T the amount of their income, the number of their defects, the hour at which they take their meals, the weak points in their character or position; but we know nothing of the secret springs of action that have made the man's life what it is; we see the whole as a great, clumsy piece of machinery, and if we *pull it to pieces*, it is in mere wanton

mischievous to find out some defect, not to discover its manifold wonders.

We are accustomed to look for sensational incidents in books, and pronounce them unnatural when we find them there ; we call the world dull and tedious, and the people who make up that world ; and this because we don't know them any more than they know us.

The last time I saw you, my friend, you were racking your brains to find some new, original subject for a novel or play, I forget which ; and just as you fancied to see a light dawn, a boring acquaintance was shown in. You told me that you never in all your life felt more inclined to kick a fellow out, and that you kept your feet tightly crossed under the table, and blessed your stars or his, that he sat himself down at the further end of it. "The greatest bore in Christendom ! Hasn't a word to say for himself !" Ay, that's it, because his mind is full of other things. What other things ? If, instead of snubbing him, you'd got him to tell you that, you'd have had the most glorious subject for novel or drama, a subject that, making the reader's hair stand on end, would have made your fame in no time.

T. sits at his quiet fireside, smoking his pipe, in his dressing-gown and slippers, or patent boots and swallow-tails, for masculine *déshabille* is no longer the fashion even in novels, though it reads well, and never fails to make an effect. The terrace in which he lives is a dull one, but he has neighbours on either side, and only a thin

wall separates him from them. What kind of neighbours? "On the one side a lot of brats; noisy, obstreperous, horrible!" groans T. And on the other? "Oh, a humdrum, respectable family. I never see or hear them." Humdrum and respectable! Why, in that house, only separated from yours by a thin wall of partition, is going on a tragedy dark and dire, that would make your warm, living flesh shudder and creep, and the blood curdle in your veins with horror.

The knowledge we have of those among whom we live is at all times but very imperfect; and this should make us slow to judge and condemn. The truth, in all probability, we never know. Each keeps the door of his secret chamber safely locked, and that which we may chance to discover by peeping through the keyhole is little enough. Mrs. Bluebeard tried that dodge, you may be sure, before she had recourse to the fatal key, which revealed to her far more than she ever bargained for. The Badestonites who so gladly patronized excitement of any kind, ate and drank, laid down and rose up again as usual, walked and talked and yawned, complained of the heat, and made it a constant subject of conversation, for want of a better. And little did they think that three such interesting things as a sudden conversion, a narrow escape from death under the most thrilling and romantic circumstances, and a serious illness, had been going on under their very eyes without their being any the wiser.

Of the conversion we know, and the escape;

but who was ill? Some few of the Badestonites knew—Jane and Mrs. Morton—the mother and son at Rockstone; the little dressmaker and Mrs. Puffit, the latter of whom gave up all hope of a second tooth for the baby, whilst the former, the poor little cripple, felt more keenly than she had ever done before the infirmity that prevented her going to inquire after the young lady who had been so good to her, who had brought her books and flowers; the last still standing on the table beside her chair, withered indeed, but how could she bear to throw them away when they were the last, perhaps the very last? who had been to her as a friend, and had given a new object to her life by teaching her to think.

“Was it Mildred, then, who was ill?”

“Yes, for the first time in her life, and so ill! whether from over-excitement or a cold caught, who cared now to inquire? As they gathered around her, those three, the sister and doctor, and the devoted old governess, they asked nothing of the past or future, they thought only of her.

She had lain in a high fever ever since she had been brought home senseless in Stephen’s arms, three days before. Jane would at once have telegraphed for Dr. Graves, but Stephen prevented her. The fever caused by over-excitement, though violent, was often only temporary, he said; it might pass away in some hours; it would be better to wait out the result of those hours.

She did so according to his desire ; but the fever, instead of lessening, increased alarmingly, so Dr. Graves was telegraphed for. Not that Mildred stood in need of his care ; two there were who watched day and night beside her bed, the one as devoted as the other, only that the one never left it, whilst the other was obliged to, sometimes. The two indefatigable watchers were Jane and Stephen MacCullan.

Looking at the young doctor as he bent over that bed, Jane knew what he suffered, because she knew for the first time that he loved. How she had arrived at that conclusion she could not have told. A word, a look, a gesture, the mute eloquence of that untiring devotion, or the natural sympathy of a common feeling ; anyhow, she knew it, and the knowledge did not shock or alarm her ; on the contrary, it was such a comfort to her—such a comfort.

“ He loves her as I do,” she said to herself, “ I can trust her to him.” And so she did, entirely.

It had not once been whispered in that sick-room that there was danger—that there could be danger. Jane asked no questions ; she watched and waited and prayed, and looked wistfully into Stephen’s face when he came, and wistfully into it again when he went, but she asked no questions.

An almost deathlike silence reigned throughout the house ; scarce a word was spoken by any one in it. Not a word had Mildred herself spoken since the hour when they had brought

her home and laid her senseless upon the bed. With bandaged head and seething brain, and pain-racked limbs, with hot, restless hands moving ceaselessly to and fro over the coverlet, she lay, and burnt and shivered and suffered, in silence.

And through the lowered blind the sun shone in so bright, and the waves that had been so cruel to her came dancing up, and on to the shingles, rippling and sparkling. And amid the deep silence of the room they could hear their music—the music she had so loved.

Shivering and shaking, tossing and burning, or lying in a dull senseless stupor, with wide open blank-staring eyes and parted lips, she had lain three weary days and nights; and Jane, looking into the young doctor's set, rigid face, asked no questions.

Mrs. MacCullan saw but little of her son now; every moment not required by his other patients was devoted to the one. He was there at all hours of the day and night. When the early dawn came struggling faintly in, he would enter with it, smile gravely upon Jane, whose anxious face looked yet more wan by the pale sickly light, then stoop over the bed where Mildred lay, and suffered in silence. In the heat of noon, when all without was life and light and fervour, he would come in again, shutting out every jarring sound, every sign of the life that seemed such a cruel mockery when she lay there lifeless. All that was not done for her, was done mechanically, as we do things from the

mere force of habit, by mere animal instinct that has nothing to do with the will. Even when his mother spoke to him, though her voice was so soft and pitying, he hardly seemed to hear her, or at least to take in the meaning of her words.

"If I could only help you," she said, on the morning of the third day, looking anxiously into the still haggard face that was not at all the face she had been so proud of, but something so sadly different—"if I could only be of some use to you, or her!"

She, too, knew his secret now, and only wondered that she had not known it long before; perhaps it was, that having nothing in the world but him, she had fondly believed him all her own—the idea of parting with what is dearest will never come to us as a natural thought. "If you could only make me of some use in watching or nursing," she pleaded, earnestly.

Silence had become so natural to Stephen those last three days, that he now only spoke with an effort. But he was grateful, very grateful, to his mother for her anxious thought of Mildred, and his face brightened just a little, as he answered her—

"Thank you, mother; but Jane never leaves her for a moment, and she's such a capital nurse. Later, perhaps, if—when she gets better; but at present she knows no one—no one."

Stephen was very grateful to his mother for her anxious thought of Mildred, and wish to be of service to her; but he could not bear to

discuss the question further, so he left her, and going to his own room, he locked himself in, and sitting down at his table—that table where he had studied and dreamt, and indulged in angry bitter thoughts, when Mildred sat in the pleasant drawing-room below, waiting and listening for him.

She was not waiting or listening for him now, and his thoughts were not angry or bitter. When the shadow of death wraps us about, nothing is left of us to the love that survives, but the tender solemn memory that records our *virtues* only, on our tombstone.

Stephen crossed his arms upon the table, and leaning forward, fixed his eyes with an almost monomaniacal stare upon a coat that hung on the door just opposite to him. It was not a remarkable coat by any means—brown and shaggy and well worn, and none the better for the drenching it had got in the late storm. But Stephen looked at it with aching hungry eyes; once even he rose, and going up to it, he touched it gently and lingeringly, groaned, then returned to his seat, and crushing his face down upon the table, flung his hands over his head.

“Oh, my love—my love!”

“If I could do something to help—something to comfort him,” sighed the poor mother. It is so hard to sit by and see those you love suffer, feeling yourself so powerless to help them.

Stephen’s mother could not raise the sick; she could not, therefore, comfort him. Raise the sick! She had once heard of One who could do that—ay, and raise the dead too. On the table

beside the window, the slanting sunlight falling full upon it, lay a book—a vulgar-looking book enough—black and shiny, and fresh from the hands of the printer; such a book as you find in chapels, Sunday-schools, and waiting-rooms; but in drawing-rooms never. Frances MacCullan knew the book well, though under another and less vulgar form. It had been familiar to her once—only too familiar! The bugbear of her childhood, rebelled against, feared, flung from her like some hated thing. Forced into her unwilling hand, hour after hour had she held it in the cramped stiffening fingers, on the long dull Sunday afternoons, which, drear as was her life at all times, seemed, on looking back, the dreariest memory it contained; page after page of its sublime mysteries she had had to get by rote; out of it she had been warned, threatened, punished—never soothed or comforted.

Who had placed it there—the vulgar, unsightly volume upon the pretty inlaid table, one of the few relics left of that former life, so brilliant but so worthless? She knew that too. The field preacher gone, she had found it where it had since lain, undisturbed. Nothing very wonderful in that. Men of his stamp always carry about with them Bibles and tracts, scattering them broadcast over the face of the earth.

The window was open, and the slanting sunlight fell full upon the book at which she was looking. Did she find it an eyesore that she went and lifted it up, then laid it down again?

It is never without a certain awe that we come upon some once familiar object long unseen. It was not without a certain awe that Frances MacCullan now touched the book that had been to her a feared and hated foe. Warning, threats, punishment—did it contain nothing else? Had Arden Graemes found nothing in it but that? Mechanically she opened it, and found what she so much needed—comfort for him, her son.

“Can a woman forget her child that she should not have compassion upon the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.”

What love was that greater than the mother-love that throbbed at her heart, but which was so powerless to help or comfort him? Powerless? Yes, only that! If she could she would—oh, how readily! What was there that he, the son of her womb, could ask of her that she would not grant? “Ask and ye shall receive?” The old words, learned amid the fast-falling tears of impatient childhood, returning once more amid the slow-falling tears of grave middle age. Faith asking of the love that was greater even than hers!

The trembling hands let the book fall together, and folded themselves in the attitude of prayer.

CHAPTER X.



WHEN on the evening of the third day of Mildred's illness Stephen arrived in Cliff Terrace, he found Jane more anxious and troubled than he had yet seen her. She met him in the passage, having been on the look-out for him.

"I'm so glad you are come," she said, steadying her voice as much as the trembling lips would allow, and clasping her hands very tight together that he might not see how they shook. "She's so bad—so bad! There's a great change, and I can't understand it. She won't be quiet a moment, but cries out and tries to get down from the bed, and she looks so wild and frightened, and stares round and round the room as if looking for some one. Do you think it is papa she wants?"

A spasm of pain contracted the young man's features, but he made no answer.

"I wish he were here—oh, how I wish he were! He'd know how to quiet her; she's so fond of him—and I can do nothing for her. It's terrible to see her suffer, and hear her rave so wildly, and not know what she wants. And she was never ill before; never, from the hour of her birth. This makes it all the harder to bear.

Poor papa ! What will he do ? The sight of her will break his heart."

Stephen knew that the crisis of the fever was near at hand ; he had come to watch her through it. One moment he paused at the door, set his teeth hard, opened and closed it noiselessly after him, then advanced to the bed.

Mildred, exhausted with the fierce struggle of the last few hours, had fallen back upon the pillows, the pale gold-gleaming hair streaming wildly over them, the bandages she had torn from her head lying on the floor beside her ; the great wide-open eyes moving ceaselessly round the room—so terror-filled, so mad ; altogether a pitiful object to look upon.

Mrs. Morton, very scared and miserable, stole away on the doctor's entrance, and he took her place, and laid his strong, gentle hand upon that of the patient. As he did so he felt a thrill run through the panting, heaving frame, and the wandering eyes, suddenly arrested, turned slowly—slowly, until they fell upon his face ; then, as she gazed at him long and earnestly—his look answering to hers, so full of tender, solemn love, so reverent too, and free from earthly passion now that the shadow of the grave lay between them—the distorted features relaxed and softened, the veiling lids drooped once more over the fever-dilated eyeballs, her gaze dropped from his, very gently and gradually she turned towards him, and as his hand fell from her wrist on to the coverlet, her hand—the poor little hot hand that had known no rest through all those weary

days—went moving over the bed until it had found and taken it into the eager, feverish grasp; then she raised it softly to her bosom, the other hand meeting and crossing over it, pressing it to her almost convulsively.

Awhile she lay thus; then she slowly rose to a sitting posture, bending her head as if listening.

“Did he call me?” she breathed, in a loud eager whisper, which seemed to fill the room, so death-like was the silence that reigned around. “Was it his voice I heard?—I was not listening for it, but I heard it when it came. I thought so, but I could not be quite sure, for the voice of the waters was in my ear, and it borrowed so many familiar tones. But what it said was always the same—‘Come, come!’ and ‘it seemed so easy to go when it came from afar to fetch me; and—and——” She paused, a look of terror quivered over her face, faded, and vanished.

“Did he say that it was wicked? He told me that I could never make him happy, and that gave me the wish to die. How could I help it, when he said that I could never make him happy?—and I could not tell him the truth. I tried to, but I couldn’t; and when the waves came to fetch me, I thought that my death would tell him all. But he was the first to fetch me after all—the *first*.”

Again she paused—a wild light broke over her face. She laughed, and flinging from her the hand she had hitherto so closely held, she

clasped her own above her head, the rapt eyes looking upward.

“ ‘ Mildred, I am here !—come to me !’ It was not the waves said that—they never called me by my name, and he only twice—the *first time*—and when he came over the waters to fetch me, through danger and death, and when he called me, I went to him. Yes, yes, I’m coming ! It was my heart said that—not my lips. They never speak to him—they dare not ;—and so he does not understand me. How should he ? I don’t understand myself—quite ; but my heart says more than his lips ever said. Oh, how much more !”

Jane, who, seated at the bed on the other side, had listened in bewildered amaze to the broken words—not half of which could she understand—now started up, her face all aglow with shame for the poor fever-stricken little sister, who was talking so wildly. “ Mildred !” she cried, in a sharp tone of reproach ; but she broke off abruptly, as she caught Stephen’s eye turned upon her with grave rebuke.

“ Hush ! she thinks that she is speaking to her father,” he said, with a faint, grave smile ; and somehow the smile and words, so calm and free from aught of earthly passion, reassured her.

“ He loves her as I do,” she said to herself ; and sinking back into her chair, she bent her face down upon the counterpane, first covering it with her hands, for the red flush of shame had not yet died out of it.

“ ‘ Put your arms about my neck—close, close

about my neck ! I shall feel stronger.' " Mildred was talking on as wildly as ever ; her words, though whispered, so passionate. " You are so wet and cold, and the blood is dripping from your hair down over your face. My arms are so weak, and—my love too. I wish it could make you happy."

Whilst speaking her head had been sinking slowly back until it rested upon Stephen's arm, and her clasped hands dropping apart the one fell softly to her bosom, the other on to his shoulder—rested there a moment, then stole around his neck, as it had done once before, at his command. Awhile the eyes kept their rapt, upward gaze, then they turned and sought his ; and there, in the fever-flushed face, in the fever-lighted eyes, he for the first time caught the look—ardent, intense—for which he had longed with so impatient a longing ; and he answered to it with one as sad and solemn as if earthly passion were for ever dead within him.

So calm his look, that by degrees it reflected itself in hers ; the shy lids quivered and drooped, as if she in her turn were ashamed of the look that had met with no response. Her head sank from his arm to his shoulder, and from his shoulder to his breast—the eyes closed, the quivering limbs relaxed their fevered tension—a long, shuddering sigh of utter weariness and content—and she was asleep. Not quite asleep at first ; for, as he slightly moved, to make her position an easier one, she once more raised to his face the veiled and dreamy eyes. " It's

all a dream," she whispered—"only a dream, I know. I have had many such."

And as she spoke there stole over him a strange sense of the unreality of everything—joy and sorrow, hopes and fears—life itself—its past, its present, its future. All as Mildred had once said—only a dream.

A long silence followed the low breathed words; and knowing that she was asleep, fast asleep now, and thinking that Jane needed comfort, he whispered her softly that Mildred slept. But the comfort did not reach her; for worn out with grief, anxiety, and the three days and nights of ceaseless watching, she too, her face pressed down upon the coverlet, and still covered with her hands, had fallen asleep.

So Stephen was the only watcher through the long hours that followed, watching them out in deep and solemn thought. The sunlight faded in the west, and twilight closed over the room, wrapping away in shadow the three motionless forms; and Stephen holding in his arms, gathered to his breast, the woman he had loved with so wild and despairing a passion, having read at last in her eyes the secret of her heart, and heard from her lips words full of love and longing, looked out upon the deepening shadows with a gaze as calm and sad as if they two, he and she, had already passed the confines of time, and stood together on the other side of the border land, turning to each other with outstretched hands and the words—At last!

* * * *

Dr. Graves had not received the telegram as soon as was supposed, its receipt being delayed some hours by his absence from home. Off by the first train that started for London, it was yet the fourth evening before he reached Badestone. Pale, haggard, agony in every feature, he sprang from the fly and up the steps into the house. Nobody on the landing—silence everywhere — up the stairs, his hand upon the door. It was opened by Stephen.

“In time?”

A smile answering to his agonized look of inquiry.

“The crisis is past, all danger over.”

John Graves reeled, staggered against the wall, he felt himself falling.

“Papa—papa!”

It was Mildred’s voice, weak and low, but so eager, so expectant, so like her mother’s too! When he fell, it was on his knees by the side of her bed.

CHAPTER XI.



MILDRED was soon about again. She was not one to play the invalid longer than was absolutely necessary. There was no keeping her in bed when she felt strong enough to get up, and the sun was beckoning her to the window ; and once there a hundred old acquaintances beckoned her forth. Papa shook his head, so did Stephen, but she got her own way for all that.

" If you will just let me go and sit under the elm-tree, papa, dear ; I can be quite as quiet there as here, you know, and so much happier."

When you have spoilt a child for nigh upon eighteen years, it's not of the least use trying to turn tyrant at the end of that time. If Mildred had consulted the Doctor's wish, she would have been kept prisoner at least a week longer ; but, consulting her own wishes only, she sat quiet and happy under the great elm-tree, just because papa could refuse her nothing, according to the old petting and spoiling system.

Mildred sitting under the elm-tree, of course John Graves sat there too, and Stephen when he called, which was nearly every day. Mildred had told papa all about his having saved her life for the second time, and Dr. Graves had

thanked him in a few broken words, and pressed his hand; and from that hour the two men were friends.

Having too often had to record things to Stephen MacCullan's disadvantage, we here gladly note a fact which redounds much to his credit. Though naturally of so jealous a temperament, he now, as if for ever cured of all his evil propensities by the one great shock, behaved remarkably well, not being cross or envious, though Mildred made as much fuss about papa as ever, lavishing on him a thousand fanciful caresses, nestling up in his arms, encircling him with her own, whispering to him, calling him by every endearing name. But then, as Stephen said to himself, his little love had belonged to that gaunt, grey-haired man long, long before she had belonged to him, so he had a prior claim to her.

Dr. MacCullan did not feel at all sure that he should never be angry or jealous, but at least he did not feel so now. How could he when he looked at the little face over which had so lately lain the shadow of the grave? Were there not sacred memories enough connected with those three sad days of watching to keep him from misjudging and wronging her again? What could he exact from her that she had not given him? Had she not been eager to sacrifice to him her very life—the fair young life that had but just begun? If wrong there had been, surely it was on his side only! He felt this but too keenly, as he watched her lying back in her father's arms, soft smiling and happy, but so

white, so thin, with all the brightness of health faded out of her face. And he had been cruel enough to feel angry with her for the red of her cheek, the dew on her lip, the first freshness and brilliancy of early youth, which no stormy passion had as yet had power to dim. Having felt and suffered, could she ever again be that which she had been? He felt that she never could—that which his jealous madness had grudged her had passed from her for ever. His hand it was that had robbed her of it; and all his love, however great, could not restore it to her. Poor, innocent, ill-used little Mildred! Why had she fallen in his way to have her life spoilt by him?

Though of a rough and stormy nature, Stephen MacCullan was noble and generous-hearted, and it is only the noble and generous who will own a wrong even to themselves.

John Graves from under his beetling brows watched the young man narrowly. Jane, whilst telling him of Mildred's illness and Dr. MacCullan's skill and devotion, had also told him something else which had startled him certainly, but been very far from displeasing him. If the young man were really all he believed him to be, and Mildred loved him as Jane declared, what was to prevent a happy future? The past? That having been outlived could also be forgotten. He half hoped it already was so—in part at least. So he watched Stephen MacCullan closely and anxiously, and the more he saw of him the better he liked him.

When came at last the hour of departure, Mildred being now so far recovered that there could be no possible excuse for his lingering longer, knowing, too, as he did, how much he was wanted at home, he could not help hoping that she would ask to go back with him; for her illness and its subsequent weakness and helplessness had made her cling to him more closely than ever. She could scarcely bear him out of her sight. How then would she bear for him to go away altogether and leave her? But the hour approached, and she said nothing.

"I'm sure a breath of Beddington air would do more towards setting her up than all the sea-breezes in the world," he said to Jane, and waited in trembling anxiety for her answer, which was anything but encouraging.

"You'll not get her to go back there, papa; it's no good thinking about it, at least at present. I sometimes think she'll never care to go there again, the memories connected with it are too dreadful!"

Jane felt glad, really glad that she could speak so calmly, that the memories at once so sweet and bitter that had been for her connected with the place were now memories only—for her all places were about the same—Beddington dearer indeed than any other, but the life of duty is to be found everywhere.

That evening, his last, seated with Mildred under the elm tree, he broached the subject, and awaiting her decision, the welfare and happiness of his whole future life trembled in the balance.

The final decision must be hers ; in her frail woman's power lay the decision that was to give back, or take from him all. He had often since the last year's terrible tragedy had serious thoughts of giving up his practice, leaving Beddington, and making for himself a new home, no matter where, for what place could ever again for him be home in the true conception of the word ? " If she will not come home, I must make a home for her elsewhere," he had said to himself many a time during the last nine months ; but knowing how much was involved in the last irrevocable decision, he had put it off from month to month, hoping against hope that time and change would yet work a cure, and bring his little girl back to him and Beddington.

But her illness, so sudden, so unexpected, had been a great shock. He felt as if she were no longer safe away from him. The agony of suspense he had endured must not be again repeated. His home must be hers. He could no longer bear her out of his sight. If she would return with him, a great and deadly sorrow would be lifted from his heart and life ; if not, no sacrifice could be too great that was made for Mildred's child. He would leave Beddington—his practice—all that made up the man's active, useful, honourable life, for her sake.

How great would be the sacrifice he dared not even realize. Still in the full enjoyment of unimpaired vigour, mental as well as physical, he must sink at once into obscure inactivity. To

begin life afresh at his age was out of the question ; the only excuse he could offer for giving up his practice, being a wish for repose. Repose, indeed ! when had he ever stood in need of that ? yet it would now be forced upon him against his will ; and losing his occupation, he would lose all that made life worth the having. John Graves was a professional man every inch of him, and nothing beyond ; awkward, reserved, unsociable, were he not the doctor there would be nothing left for him but to turn hermit, and flee the face of man.

Almost passionately attached to the house he had called his home for more than thirty years, he could scarcely realize the possibility of having to leave it with all its tender holy associations to strangers ; and yet, if Mildred wished it, it must be. She was his first thought ; if she could not look upon Woodford as her home, he must find for her another.

Several times he had to clear his throat before he got the words fairly out, but they were spoken at last, and quietly.

“ Do you know that it’s just nine months since—since you left Woodford ? ”

No answer.

“ Every one asks me whether you never mean to return ? ”

Still no answer.

Then the grave, direct question, so gentle, so sad—“ Do you wish never to go back to the old home, Mildred ? ”

"The dear, beautiful old home—oh, papa!"

"Do you know what I have been thinking lately—these last few days, I mean?"

A wistful, eager look, and the great tears filling her eyes.

"I have been thinking, darling, that if you would go back, and we could all be happy there once more as we used to be—I am no longer young, and the place is growing year by year—I would take a partner, some one in whom I could have perfect confidence; Stephen MacCullan, for instance. He is your last living relation on your mother's side—the last, he and his mother, who bear her name. I should like to have him as my partner and friend; he is clever and good, and I like him better than any one else in the world, after you and Jane."

A glad, proud light in the upturned eyes, and a soft kiss, so shy, so grateful.

"What do you say?"

The look and kiss had given him hope.

"If I could forget—oh, if I could but forget!"

"Shall I leave Beddington, and make for you a new home elsewhere? Do you think that would make you happy?"

"I think," she answered passionately, and bursting into tears, "that if I were to see the dear old home and remember that dreadful night, it would break my heart."

Her word had decided the question as he had said it should. There now remained for him but to make the final arrangements; these made, and a new home found, he would come to fetch

her. Perhaps after a time she would leave the new home for another, and he should be left alone with little Jane and his worthless, wasted life; but her heart must not be broken, her tears must be dried, no matter at what cost to him.

He spoke very gently and soothingly—ay, and cheerily, too; and she listened in silence, her head against her breast. The next morning he started early, before Mildred was awake. He came in to look at her and bid her good-bye; but finding her asleep, with flushed cheeks and parted smiling lips, he dared not disturb her even by a kiss.

Jane was up, of course, and had got his breakfast ready, presiding at it in her usual brisk, simple fashion. The meal over, she accompanied him to the gate, where they found Stephen MacCullan.

“You will look after her until I come to fetch her. I owe her life to you.”

A hearty pressure of the hand, and the two men parted.

Stephen watched the carriage out of sight, then glanced up at the window of the room where Mildred slept, and walked away towards the cliffs, Woolfert at his heels.

As his morning walk lasted two hours, and his face wore an uncommonly bright eager look as he entered the breakfast-room at Rockstone, we may naturally infer that his meditations had been of an unusually pleasant order. With them we have nothing whatever to do; but the conclusion

to which they had tended and which he repeated to himself for the twentieth time as he shook the dust from his boots on the door-mat was this—

“First, I must hear it from her own lips, of course ; it would never do to trust to the ravings of fever.” His look as he said this proved, however, that he did trust to them implicitly. “And permission gained, I shall write to her father, and he’ll give her to me—he will, or I’m very much mistaken.”

CHAPTER XII.



MILDRED awaking, found papa gone ; and when Jane observed apologetically, "You were so sound asleep, dear, you know, that he could not bear to awake you. He thought it best to——" she broke in hurriedly—"Yes, better so, much better." Then after awhile she added, in a piteous voice, "Oh, Jane, I wish there were no such things as partings. To enjoy and then lose, is so sad, so sad."

All that day she sat very quiet ; and in the evening, instead of going as usual to the elm tree—how could she go when papa, who had sat with her there last, was now so far away ?—she stayed in the sitting-room with Jane, and sewed as if for her life, with nervously busy fingers, and eyes that never once looked up.

"Put that away now," Jane said at last, for she had seen the girl's lip droop and quiver, and two great tears fall upon the work at which she was stitching so diligently. "Papa said you were not to over-fatigue yourself, and Stephen said so too."

"It'll be nice dear, wont it ?" Mildred said, holding up at arm's length the daintiest of baby frocks. "A little bow must come here,

and a ribbon there. It's for Mrs. Puffit's baby, you know, it's such a pretty little thing, and only think, it's already cut its second tooth; Mr. MacCullan told me so. I'm so glad he taught me to like work, and gave me the wish to be useful. It's such a comfort when you're not happy yourself to think that you make others so. It's been such a comfort to me making this little frock to-day." And a smile, soft and warm, broke out over the quivering lips, the first Jane had seen that day.

She hailed it for more reasons than one. Ever since Mildred's recovery her thoughts had turned continually upon one subject, and she had long since come to the conclusion that the very best thing for the little sister would be for her to marry Stephen MacCullan, who already possessed so great an influence over her, and who, being the noblest and best of men, would know how to use it for good. "He loves her, and she loves him—yes, she does, though she herself may not know it, and he saved her life twice, so that life belongs to him. He has a double claim upon her, and if she doesn't marry him, she will never marry at all; for she will never find another who suits her so well, and to whom she owes so much. It would be the best thing, the very best thing, and then poor papa would not have to leave Beddington, which would nearly break his heart, I know."

Jane had more consideration for the father's feelings than had little Mildred, the spoilt child of his love.

Full of her pet plan, and anxious to know what Mildred would think of it, her next remark had more connexion with her own thoughts than her sister's words.

"I'm so glad that papa likes him too ; better than any other man he ever knew."

There had been a pang of jealousy at her heart as she heard this, but she had silenced it. She did so now for the second time, as she repeated stoutly, "Better than any other man he ever knew, he told me so. I knew that they would suit ; they are just the men to get on well together, and papa really likes so few people."

"Yes, yes, I know," Mildred answered with a smile, warmer and brighter even than that bestowed on the baby frock.

"And to think that we owe him your life—Oh, Mildred, to think of that !—that he saved it twice, and once too at the risk of his own. If he had not saved, he must have died with you."

"Died with me !" Mildred echoed softly ; and the work dropped from her lap as her hands folded themselves upon it.

"Then in your illness he was so devoted. I'm sure he could not have taken it more to heart if you had been his sister ; he would not have taken it as much to heart, I think."

"Why ? Because he loves me better than a sister—do you think that, Jane ?" Mildred asked, with one of the deep looks that changed her whole face, making it unchildlike.

"Yes, dear, I do."

Jane said this solemnly, and her colour rose,

and her heart beat ; for she felt that she was treading upon dangerous ground, and who could tell how it was all to end ?

“ Better than a sister—oh, what a pity !”

“ A pity to be loved by such a man as Stephen MacCullan,” cried Jane, indignantly.

“ To love, and then lose is so sad, so sad.”

“ Then you don’t care for him after all ?” Jane’s looks betrayed more surprise even than her words.

A quick raising of the clasped hands to her bosom, a quick catching of her breath, that was all the answer Mildred made. How could she put into words feelings for which even her own heart had found no name ?

Jane, never a first-rate hand at speechifying, and now fairly mystified, not knowing what to say, very wisely said nothing ; and after an awkward pause, Mildred said, very demurely—

“ If he loves me so very much, better than a sister, he would like to marry me—eh, Jane ?”

“ Well, and if he would ?”

“ Oh, Jane, don’t you know—have you forgotten why I could never belong to him—never—never ?”

“ No, I don’t know,” she answered, boldly. “ I don’t see why the happiness of two lives”—she might have said three, without counting her own, poor child—“ should be sacrificed to the past, that no sacrifice, however great, can now recall.”

“ No, it can never be recalled, or forgotten either,” Mildred broke in, despairingly ; “ I am his for ever, in death as in life—it must be so. He too loved me, and I killed him with my own

hand! How could I ever marry another, when I belong to him? He said I did, and he kissed me, and took away mamma's rose out of my bosom, and he said that the rose and the kiss gave me to him, and I felt it did; and when the thought drove me mad I put out my hand. Oh, Jane! you know, it was so wicked, so cruel, but I couldn't help it."

"No, dear, of course you couldn't; his foot slipped and he fell, but you never belonged to him—you never could, for you did not love him. He had no right to steal your kisses or your rose either, for you never would have given them to him, would you?"

"I—I don't know if he had asked me," shuddered Mildred. "It all seemed so strange then, I did not understand; and when he told me that he loved me better than all the world I felt so sorry for him and—for myself."

"But you didn't love him," persisted Jane, "or you would not have felt sorry; did you feel sorry when Stephen told you that he loved you?"

Again the tell-tale blush, and the rapturous light in the eyes, one moment raised, then dropped as suddenly.

"I don't know. I cried so much, but that was because he was angry with me."

"Why? because you would not tell him that you loved him?"

"I wished to so much, but I could not; I dared not, and though I was so unhappy and he too, I'm glad he does not know it—very glad."

"But he does know it," Jane said, averting

her head. The ground upon which she was treading grew always more and more dangerous, but she was of too straightforward a nature to pause for fear of consequences.

Mildred looked up startled.

"You told it him—oh, Jane!"

"No, dear, you told it him yourself."

"I?"

"Yes; when you were so very ill; in the delirium of fever you told him all."

"All?"

"You told him how you loved him, and then you put your arm round his neck and your head on his breast, and so you fell asleep, and that sleep it was that saved you."

"I told him that I loved him?" Mildred murmured; "I told him *that*?"

"Yes, dear, you did indeed; at first I was ashamed and shocked, and wished to stop you, but he wouldn't let me. He knew it was the fever, and that you would be quieter for having spoken. He is so good! and I thought—he loves her too, and she belongs to him, for he risked his own life to save hers, and now that he knows the truth, when she's quite well again he'll speak to her, and she'll repeat all that she says now—so it does not matter."

Jane's head was still averted, and her heart beat very fast. What had she said? She dared not look at the little face that, shame-dyed and piteous, would reproach her indelicacy. But the girl's face was neither piteous nor shame-dyed; on the contrary, it was both peaceful and happy.

CHAPTER XIII.



STEPHEN had not seen Mildred since the day of her father's departure, for he had to make up for lost time, the time spent by his little love's sick-bed. In the natural selfishness of grief he had somewhat neglected his other patients, and now in the full flush of recovered hope and joy—excited, elated, scarce able to realize the happiness of which he had despaired—he returned with fresh ardour to the work that had been so intolerably irksome when all his thoughts centred upon that upper room where she lay ill—perhaps dying.

Many wondered, no doubt, what had come to Dr. MacCullan. Some maybe guessed ; not the truth, of course, only a very small part of it. The young doctor was in love—nothing more natural at his age—he had certainly not been himself of late ; quite natural too ; he had been going through all the different stages of the malady which is as peculiar to his age as measles is to an earlier epoch. The first symptoms—restlessness and feverishness, sleeplessness too and loss of appetite, a gloomy hankering after solitude, joined to a most strange absentness of look and manner, which renders the once chosen companion an unmitigated bore.

“ Good-bye, old fellow ; hailed you three times and you didn’t hear—I thought there was something odd about the look of your hair behind. In love to a dead certainty—meet next at the wedding breakfast, eh ? Walk home with you ? No, by Jove ! never had much sympathy for that sort of thing, and can’t stand being bored.”

Some few of Dr. MacCullan’s patients came very near the truth in their guesses, others saw it only from afar ; many a young lady sighed, and elder lady smiled ; for he was popular with both old and young was Stephen MacCullan, only too popular with the former, perhaps !

One evening, entering the Rockstone garden by the postern gate, he found Mildred there, alone, and on the very spot where he had found her once before, when she had waited to give him his mother’s message, and had received a lecture instead of thanks. There was no thought of avoiding her now. He had nothing to conceal or resist, he might therefore be amiable and cousinly, without fear of consequences.

She was half sitting, half lying on the grass, her elbows resting upon it, her chin on her open palm. At the sound of approaching footsteps she looked up, and her face told Stephen, more plainly even than words, how glad she was to see him.

“ Aunt and Jane have gone into the village ; I wish I could have gone too.”

“ Why, I thought you hated going into the village—still as capricious as ever, I see.”

"Poor Mary Howitt, it's so long since I saw her, and the baby too; I should like to see its new tooth, and take it the little frock I made."

"You made?"

"Yes, all myself, only Jane cut it out, because I didn't know how. It's white, with blue ribbons, and so pretty!"

Nursing the baby, making frocks for the baby, longing to see the baby—was not the child's education complete? What fears could the man now possibly have for his future happiness? Having thus far humanized the little elfin sprite, to what height of domestic perfection might he not in time bring her!

Perfection, indeed! she should remain just what she was, or he would have nothing to say to her. She was already perfection in his eyes, at that moment, at least.

He had thrown himself down on the grass beside her; he looked bright, eager, happy, all the nasty hard lines smoothed from his handsome face. If Mildred's wild, shy eyes stole every now and then to it fondly, admiringly, it was no great wonder.

"And it's really cutting the third tooth?"

"Really and truly, I could scarcely myself credit the astounding fact, but seeing is believing; I saw and believed."

"I'm so glad; I wish I could see it too."

"I shall begin to get jealous of Mrs. Puffit's baby, if she occupies so much of your thoughts."

Mildred did not ask what right he had over

her thoughts; she only answered softly, "You need not."

"Must I never feel jealous again?"

His voice was lower, he was coming nearer; she knew it, but it did not startle her. She had said to herself, "He will speak to me and I will tell him all—all! and he will help me to do right."

"One thing only could cure me quite, Mildred."

At the sound of her name she looked quickly up, proud and pleased.

"Will you always call me Mildred, now—always?"

"If you will call me Stephen."

"I don't know if I can," she answered, demurely, and with downcast lids.

"Try. It's not such an ugly name, is it?"

"Stephen." It was the faintest of whispers, scarce audible. "Stephen!" a whisper still, but not quite so low. And having thus repeated it, she clasped her hands and blushed and smiled. "It's very pretty, and I've often said it to myself, very often; but I never said it aloud but once." She turned on him her radiant, blushing face, and as her eyes looked straight up into his, they filled. "Never but once," she repeated, almost passionately.

"Why not?"

"Don't you understand? I thought you would," and the little face grew wistful and troubled. "There are so many things that can never be spoken aloud, even when we are

alone, that can only be thought and understood."

"That day of the storm, when you stood on the rock, did you call me?"

"Call you, oh no! how could I think that you were there, come over that dreadful sea to fetch me?"

"I thought I heard your voice calling to me; it was just before I looked up and saw you."

Her head drooped lower still, and she fell to plucking the long blades of grass that lay beneath her hand, turning them about her fingers.

"When I felt so sure that all was over, when I saw the waves rising higher and higher, and I knew that death and I were alone together, I thought I would say your name aloud, just once, to hear how it sounded before I died."

Her last thought had been for him then, the last name upon her lips would have been his, and he had doubted her love, misjudged, wronged her. It was his duty to own the wrong, and beg her pardon; he did nothing of the kind, however, and his next words were an accusation, for there was a mystery he wished cleared up.

"What took you to Giant's Head on such a day, Mildred? you must have known that there was danger."

"I was not thinking of the danger," she answered, meekly enough; "I was so sorry to have made you unhappy, and I always feel so restless in a storm, so I went out and along the beach; and when the wind blew, and the waves came dashing up almost to my feet, I felt less un-

happy, and I went on and on, and got to the rock; and then I remembered how you had warned me of the danger, but the thought came too late, and I could not feel so very sorry, for you had said that I could never make you happy; and there was something else I wished so much to forget, and it's only death that can help you to do that. I did not go there to die, only when death came I could not help feeling glad; but I did not know it was wicked," she added, "until you told me so."

"Had you no pity for me? What would life be to me without you?"

"You said I could never make you happy," she repeated, her lip pouting and quivering.

"Foolish child—and you think you could?"

Stephen, so sure now of her, of himself, of their great unchanging love, reaching on into the dim horizon of the future, and beyond, could afford to play a little with her feelings, to draw her out, and make her speak of them.

He waited for her answer, but none came, not even a look.

"And you really think that a mere child like you could make a full grown, rational man happy?"

Such cruelly mocking words, so meekly answered too! "Mamma was not older than I when she married, and yet she made papa happy, you can't think how happy! Would you be afraid to let me try?"

Stephen laughed aloud. He had been afraid,

mightily afraid of being made unhappy by her, and now he laughed aloud at the bare idea.

"I would rather be made unhappy by you than happy by any one else," he answered, as hundreds have done before him, little thinking what nonsense they talk. "I once thought I could do without your love, that I could do much better without than with it. I have since found that I was mistaken. Oh, child, child," with the old passionate ring in the broken voice, "you must love me! Do you hear?—you must! Not as you love papa and sister Jane, but as I love you. What would my life be without you?"

"What mine would be without you," the girl answered, softly.

"My love, my darling!" He gathered her to him, his arms so close around her, hiding away out of sight the little figure that was so slight, so child-like that it almost disappeared in the man's large embrace.

He did not kiss her, not even the soft bright hair that lay beneath his lips; he only strained her to him, then let her go, and bent his face upon his hands. One question more, and the wayward passionate heart would be at rest for evermore.

"Come here, Mildred, close beside me, and give me your little hand that I may hide my face down upon it, whilst I ask you a question."

She gave her hand, but it trembled; he felt that it did so, and he set his teeth hard. What right had he to inquire of her past, when she so

readily confided to him her future. What right have we any of us to claim the secrets of another heart?

"I know that you love me now. I doubted it as long as I could, but I believe at last. You love me now, but—did you never love another as well?"

"Papa and Jane—do you mean them?"

"No."

"Ah! I know—you mean him?"

There was a *him*, then, in the case, as he had suspected.

"Yes, did you love him?"

He felt how the hand he held throbbed and fluttered like a frightened bird in his grasp; he felt a shudder run through the woman's frame, and her voice had in it something hard and unnatural as she answered—

"Love *him*! No; I sometimes thought that I hated him. I hope I did not. Was it that thought made you so angry with me?" He kissed the little hand he held again and again; and that was his only answer. "How could you know about him? No one knows but papa and Jane."

"I know nothing; I was jealous and suspicious, that's all."

"I'm glad that you guessed something," Mildred answered, gravely; "for I wish to tell you all, and that makes it easier. But please let go my hand. I shall be so glad when you know all, and you will help me to do right; but you

mustn't hold my hand, for I'm afraid you'll be very, very angry with me."

Angry with her! Could it be possible that she had really something to tell him that would part them after all—all their love and sorrow? He released her hand, and she folded it over the other in her lap.

"May I tell you now?"

And with a great dread throbbing at his heart, he answered—"Yes."

Then the old, sad story was gone over once more—sad only, not terrible, when related by those soft baby lips, and in that plaintive child's voice.

"That's what I'm always trying to forget, and can't. That's why I could not feel so sorry when death came to fetch me, and that's why I could not tell you that I loved you," she added, innocently. "I could not tell you how wicked and cruel I had been, so I dared not tell you my other secret either."

For some moments Stephen sat like one stunned. Could anything be more horrible than the story to which he had listened? And yet so softly had the fatal words been spoken, so fair and innocent looked the childish creature at his side, that he felt more bewildered than shocked. That the wee frail hand he had but now held so close and warm in his could have dealt the death-blow seemed a thing altogether incredible. The man who had stolen her flower and kisses, taking undue advantage of the trust reposed in him,

the girl's innocent soul had instinctively revolted at the coward insolence of the proffered caress, the outstretched hand making him start back, his foot had slipped over the brink into the yawning chasm below. Ill-fated man—ill-fated child!

"And that was why you left Beddington," he said at last. It was not a question; he was only thinking how a few words had served to clear up the mystery that had puzzled and tormented him for months. A few words, and they such sad and awful ones!

"Yes, we went up to London, but I didn't like being there; and when I told papa how much I wished to see the sea, he sent us here."

"Poor Dr. Graves! He must find it very dull being all alone at home."

Another thought spoken aloud. Stephen now saw the true position of affairs—the sacrifice of the many to the one. Of the grey-haired father, the sister, and who could say how many more? No wonder that the Doctor's face had looked so grave and careworn; no wonder he could not bear his little daughter out of his sight during the few days they were together after months of compulsory separation.

"Is it your father's wish that you should stay away from home?"

"His wish? Oh no! He'd be so happy if I would go back, but I can't; it would break my heart! To see the old home, where I used to be so happy, but where I can never be happy again; to be haunted at every step by the

dreadful thought of the past; I couldn't bear it!"

"You never mean to go home, then?"

"Never. I told papa so; and he says that he'll sell his practice and retire, and find me a home in some other place, and then he'll come and fetch me."

Stephen sighed; the sigh was not for himself or the poor little love who had brought trouble and sorrow upon so many lives, but for the grey-haired father, whose future was to be thus sacrificed to her. Himself ambitious, ardent, zealous in the work he had undertaken, he understood better than another all that was entailed in the few words spoken so lightly. So lightly? Yes, the child of so much love was about to ruin the life devoted to her; and she laughed and sang and was happy, unconscious even of the deadly wrong inflicted. Did he feel angry with her for this? Did he grudge her those few bright happy days, or blame her for her playful ways and pretty, childish egotism? No; he only pitied her, and the man whose useful, noble life she could thus thoughtlessly destroy.

"I can't think how I did it," she said, looking down ruefully at the little hand. "It's so small and weak, and he was so big and strong."

"The strong too often suffer by the hand of the weak," Stephen said; and his voice sounded stern, though he did not mean that it should. Well might he have feared entrusting to her woman's hand the happiness and honour of his

life, another had done so, and she was about to destroy it.

She saw that his look was averted from her, and she grew alarmed.

"Are you angry with me?" she breathed, edging closer, so as to get a peep into his face. "Do you think me so very wicked? I feared you would; but then I thought that when I had told you all you would be sorry for me, and help me to do right."

"And so, with God's help, I will," came the low, solemn answer.

"I will do anything you tell you," she said, humbly, as if conscious of his disapproval.

"And if I tell you that it is your duty to prevent the sacrifice your father is willing to make for you, the sacrifice of his whole future life, to feelings that you should learn to conquer for his sake—to prevent his giving up his practice and leaving the place where he has lived and worked for more than half a lifetime—if I tell you that the right thing for you to do is to go back to the home he made years ago for your mother, and make it as bright and happy for him as it was before that trouble fell on you—what will you say then?"

"That I will do as you bid me."

"God bless you, Mildred!"

Once more he had misjudged and wronged her. Her meek and ready submission was almost more than he could bear; but their tête-à-tête was here put a stop to by the return of the two ladies, and soon after the sisters left.

Stephen accompanied them home, shaking hands with Jane first at parting, that the hearty cousinly pressure might not interfere with the touch of that other small, soft, downy hand.

"I'll do as you bid me," Mildred said by way of good night, raising to his face the shy, reverential eyes. "I knew that you would help me to do right."

Having reached her room she at once sat down to the writing-table, and drew to her pen and paper, not even waiting first to take off her hat and jacket.

"You're never going to write now?" Jane asked, surprised. "Wait, at least, till we have candles; why, you couldn't see the words as you write them."

"Oh, it's only just a line to papa."

The line was this :—

"DEAR PAPA—

"Please come and fetch me. I want to go home, and make it as bright and happy for you as it was before the trouble fell on me."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE next evening was to be spent at Rockstone, and Mrs. MacCullan when proffering the invitation had turned a smiling look from Stephen to Mildred, and back again to Stephen. But neither look nor smile was responded to or even seen; how could it be when the son's eyes were fixed with almost devouring fondness upon the girl's face, covering it with his lover gaze?

The mother's lip quivered, and turning hastily, she spoke to Jane. Outwardly so calm, more so perhaps than she had ever been before, for she had her feelings well under control, and could hide what she could not conquer, no one would have guessed how fierce a struggle was going on in the woman's heart.

A cold exterior too often hides a passionate nature. Frances MacCullan's nature was passionate in the extreme; she could never do things by halves. It stands to reason therefore that she loved her handsome son far more than was either necessary or expedient. It is quite a mistake to be over-fond of any one, and for a mother to be jealous of her son's fancies is about as reasonable as for a wife to be jealous of her husband's newspapers. Nevertheless, Frances Mac-

Cullan was jealous of her son's love for Mildred Graves. Hitherto her own influence over him had been all-powerful—her love the only love he cared for; every hour, every thought not devoted to his profession had been given to her. Of marriage he had always spoken with a certain careless contempt. Many times she had heard him say, that more lives were ruined by early or unsuitable marriages than by anything else, and she had, therefore, grown to look upon him as so confirmed a bachelor that no change seemed possible. And lo! suddenly, unexpectedly, the change had come; and her son was lost to her for ever. He no longer belonged to her, but to the stranger child, who had caught him in spite of himself, with her beautiful wild eyes. She now filled up his life—his dreams, waking or sleeping—his thoughts. And what was then left for the mother, who loved him exclusively, having but him left to her of all the happy, brilliant past?

But though jealous she was not unjust; she knew that if lost to her now she had kept him longer than most mothers keep their sons, that his falling in love at last and marrying was the most natural thing in the world. Nay, would she have it otherwise? Would she have the name of which she had been so foolishly proud die out and become extinct? Would she wish him, her noble, handsome boy, to be the last of his race? God forbid!

Reasoning thus she would grow calm, and at times she could even feel grateful to the girl

whose shy looks and winsome ways had forced upon him the future he might never have contemplated but for her.

During Mildred's illness, thinking only of his sorrow, not her own, she had trembled and grieved and prayed, fondly believing that the child's life spared, all the rest would be easy.

Is it not thus that we think and pray one and all, looking only to the present? This one thing, O God! merciful and righteous—this one, and then, Thy will be done. And the prayer granted, the passionate human heart dissatisfied still, the deadly struggle with itself begins once more.

Mildred out of danger, Mildred about again, Stephen's mother rejoiced in his joy, but was jealous of his love as heretofore.

"If I had died how easily could she have comforted him for my loss. How impossible I found it to comfort him even for her danger!"

Yes, Mrs. MacCullan was certainly very jealous, but she kept her folly to herself, like a sensible woman; no one was allowed to see or even guess at it; betrayed to Stephen, she would lose whatever influence she might yet possess; and as to the child Mildred, was it her fault that she was pretty and soft, and had eyes that said more than the shy lips would ever have dared to say? So she smiled on her son, as usual, and was very kind and gentle to his little love, more than gentle sometimes, almost tender; and thus hidden away, kept bravely out of sight, the mother's sorrow became a sacred thing.

One other thing besides her jealousy troubled

the mother's heart. A certain mystery was connected with Mildred Graves, and that mystery must be cleared up before her son proposed to her. What was the meaning of her sudden departure from home, and the nine months spent away from it? Every allusion to the subject made Jane tremble and turn pale, as if much of sorrow and something too of shame lay there concealed. She felt it her duty to investigate the matter further—but how? Should she question Jane, or Mildred herself?

Sometimes she half fancied that Stephen was troubled by the same doubts. The day after his garden interview with Mildred she noticed that he looked pale and worried; something evidently disturbed him, and he was trying to hide it from the watchful mother eye. Longing for the mutual sympathy that had once existed between them she ventured a remark, but he turned from her impatiently, then returned a laughing answer to the anxious question. Even the privilege of his confidence was now denied her.

When the sisters arrived in the evening they found their hostess alone.

"Stephen is not at home, my dears; he was called away about an hour ago, and there's little chance, I fear, of his returning before you leave. A very critical case, he says, in which he is much interested. I'm sorry it should have been just to-day." And she glanced at Mildred as she spoke, sorry for the child's disappointment.

Jane expressed a cousinly regret at his ab-

sence. Mildred said nothing ; but presently remarking that it was cold, she drew her favourite chair to the fire, and calling Woolfert to her side, she coaxed his big head on to her lap, and her little hand resting caressingly upon it, she leant back, remarking, with a sigh of content—" that it was so comfortable."

" I have still the old Scotch love for a blazing hearth," Mrs. MacCullan answered, " and am only too glad of an excuse for having the fire lit. If we can't gather under the elm tree, the next best thing is to gather round the chimney."

And round it they gathered accordingly, and very bright and cosy the room looked in the red fire glow.

It was the first real autumn day the year had known, cold, boisterous, and unfriendly ; and as the three sat and talked and laughed—or the two rather, for Mildred was unusually silent—the wind came sweeping round the house, and bent the branches of the trees against the window panes, at which they beat with faint, mysteriousappings. From time to time Mildred would look up, and turn towards the sound, then draw her arm closer round about Woolfert, who still kept close at her side, his head upon her lap.

" You don't like the wind," Mrs. MacCullan observed ; she had lately taken to watching the young girl's face, and was quick to detect any change in it.

" I used to like it," Mildred answered, in a low, sad voice, " for it seemed to speak to me,

and tell me such wonderful things ; but now—it only speaks of death.”

“ Ah, yes—of course—I understand.” Mrs. MacCullan spoke pityingly. She was thinking of the late storm that had so nearly cost the poor child her life.

“ You can’t understand, because you don’t know. I wish you did.”

“ Know what ? ”

“ The story of——”

But here Jane broke in, pale and scared. Mildred had not been herself all day. What had come to her ? Was she about to betray herself—there, to that stern, proud woman ? Sick with apprehension, she tried to turn it off with a laugh, but it was hollow and unnatural.

A sudden instinct at the mother’s heart told her that the secret she had so long wished to penetrate now lay on the girl’s lips, ready to be revealed.

“ If you wish me to know it, Mildred, tell it me. I am Stephen’s mother. I may be your mother once. Tell it me.”

It was cruel of Stephen’s mother to wish to force from her her poor secret, but her words were so gentle, so solemn, and her voice so like his ! Mildred gave her a quick upward look, and beat her hands together in mingled joy and terror.

“ Tell it all over again ! Why could he not tell you—he knows it all. But no—no ; of course not. He could not bear to speak of it—how could he ? He did not ask me for it—he would

never have done that, he is so good ; but I told it him because I knew he loved me, and would help me to do right."

" Poor child !"

The words broke involuntarily from the woman's pitying heart. What harm could there possibly be in that pretty baby thing, with the sweet tremulous lips and the deep solemn look ? Looking at her she could neither doubt nor fear, and a softer light stole into the keen far-seeing eyes that had seen so much, and ached and wept so much, but which could still look out upon the world so cold and calm.

" If I thought you would not be angry with me—but you are his mother, and may be my mother once. It must be so easy to tell all to one's mother." The girl's head drooped, and her lips smiled faintly, but they quivered too. " I will tell you."

" No, no," Jane cried, in an agony, almost beside herself with grief and shame. " Not now at least, not here."

But Mildred turned from her to Stephen's mother. " Let me speak, dear ; it is for the last time. If I do not tell her Stephen must, and he loves me, and could not bear to speak of it. If she is to be my mother, she must know all. I thought the grave would hide its secret ; but it didn't. I thought I could forget ; but I can't. Don't you hear how the wind tells the same story over and over again ? How can I hide what God wont allow me to forget ?"

As if in answer to the wild, reckless words

another storm gust came sweeping round the house, tearing at the windows as if to force an entrance, then dying away with a dismal wail.

Five minutes afterwards, Stephen's mother having heard Mildred's story told, not softly and whisperingly as it had been told the day before, but in a few wild, broken words, with sharp, rapid utterance and horror-filled looks, sat, stunned and bewildered, scarce knowing whether to believe the evidence of her senses, to believe the girl before her a murderess—or mad.

"I did not mean to be wicked and crue; it was all so strange, so dreadful. I knew that the pit was near, and that it was very deep, that once in he would return no more, but how could I help my hand going out to strike him down?"

"Don't listen to her—oh, don't, don't—she doesn't know what she says!"

Sharp as a cry rang out the sister's despairing appeal, then silence fell over the room. Jane's face was hidden in her hands. Stephen's mother sat stunned and bewildered; too startled, too shocked for words; and Mildred, her story told, bent towards her, stretching out to her both arms.

So pretty, so innocent-looking, the girl he loved, who had taken her place in his heart and life, whom he had meant to make his wife—a murderess or—mad!

"I have told you all—wont you speak to me?"

The heart-broken words, the mute supplication of the outstretched arms—but there was no

response, no softening of the proud, stern face. Disgrace and crime none the less real for being hidden and disowned ; and they had wished to drag him, her son, down with them, to blast his fair name with the foul breath of shame. Was it for this he had held his head so high, and his honour so spotless, through all these years ? No wonder that the wretched father had favoured his suit, glad to transfer the stain of blood from his own disgraced name to another, and that other, hers ! A plot between the father and sister to get rid of the poor little culprit, who, moved by some lingering sentiment of honour, had upset their plans, and ruined her own prospects.

Mrs. MacCullan was a woman of the world. Her experiences of life had been many and bitter, and they had taught her to mistrust and condemn. A vile plot concocted by the father and daughter to entrap an honourable man into a dishonourable marriage, that was to her a thing quite natural and probable ; whereas it was the very last thing that would ever have occurred to the son's mind. What a different effect had the same story made upon the two hearers. In the one it had excited indignation, scorn, and horror ; in the other only the deepest pity. In the eyes of the one, the devoted father and sister were mean conspirators ; in the eyes of the other, martyrs. So differently are we judged by our fellow-men that virtues are degraded to vices and vices raised to virtues, according to the eyes that look upon them.

If Mildred could not read the mother's feelings in her face, Jane could ; and as she turned her look from the hard set features to the poor little sister, almost kneeling at her feet, her honest cheek flushed crimson with shame and humiliation. "Come away !" she said, authoritatively. "What right have you to be kneeling there? What right had you to say what you said? Come away !"

But Mildred pushed her aside, her hands still outstretched to Stephen's mother.

"Wont you speak to me? Wont you forgive me, and take me for your child, as you said you would? I never had a mother, if I had it would have been all so different ; but I did not mean to be wicked or cruel, and I'll never be so again — never ! He'll teach me to be good, and I'll do all he tells me, and try so hard to make him happy !"

Still no answer, no softening of the cold, blue eye.

"Come away !" repeated Jane, passionately, the indignant tears starting to her eyes ; and she threw around the slight crouching figure the protecting sister arms. "What would papa say to see you so ?—come !"

"I would love him so much—I think I could make him happy if you would only let me try."

Mrs. MacCullan rose, every feature hardened into the set look of resolve that all knew so well who knew anything of the MacCullan family.

"It's not for me either to pardon or blame,

I've no right to judge, but with my consent Stephen shall never sully the name he bears, I would rather see him dead than dishonoured. He must choose between you and his mother. May God help him to do what is right."

At the last words Mildred's outstretched arms dropped to her side, and she rose slowly from her knees to her feet, gathered herself together, and lifted the head that, with its pale pure profile, could look as nobly proud as that of Stephen's mother; ay, and more so too! She was no longer the child, who with eyes and words and trembling outspread hands had pleaded so passionately, but in vain. She now appeared in a new light altogether, as the woman and the MacCullan.

"Yes, you are his mother, and his first duty is to you; he must never grieve you, or break your heart, or dishonour the name he bears—the name my mother bore. I never knew my mother. If she had lived I would never have grieved her, not even for my love for him. He is good; God will help him to do what is right, as he helped me. You must tell him that it's all over between us. I will never marry him without your consent; I wont even see him again unless you send him to me. You are his mother. He must not make you unhappy. I understand things better now; it was he who taught me to understand, and gave me the wish to do right."

And as the girl said this, rather to herself than the woman who had so sternly cast her off, a solemn light broke over her face.

Stephen did not return that night, and the next morning only for a few minutes, having a consultation to attend at Ryde. The case he had in hand, and which had kept him waiting and watching through the night, was, as Mrs. MacCullan had said, a very critical one, and his thoughts were far more with his patient than his mother, as he went in to tell her that he should not be back that day, probably not even the next, as he should go straight on from Ryde to Windon, where lived his interesting case. His mind wholly given at that moment to his profession, he did not notice her strangely agitated looks.

"I so much wished to speak to you, Stephen."

"Never mind now, mother; I'm in a dreadful hurry, and must be off at once—good-bye."

He kissed her and left the room and house.

The mother's wistful looks followed him down the garden, and never had the future seemed so utterly, hopelessly drear. Where would it all end? Would he ever forgive her interference? and yet how could she allow him to be duped, entrapped, drawn into a connexion so unworthy of him and of the name he bore? She had but done her duty, and yet her thoughts dare not go any further; she dared not think, she dared not look forward even a day. Angry, restless, miserable, she remembered how, when all had gone so smoothly, she had murmured and fretted, repining at the very happiness that now disturbed, she would give her life to restore. Oh! if the burden of that new sorrow would but fall from their

lives ! If all could be once more as it had been, or seemed to be, but some hours before, how differently would she view things to what she had done—how happy, how blessed would she be !

Still the cry of the wayward heart. "Only this one thing, O God ! righteous and merciful, and then—Thy will be done."

CHAPTER XV.



THREE days Stephen was absent, and three days Mildred sat beneath the elm tree in the back garden, where she could see nothing but rock, sea, and sky. There was a little iron gate at the end of the garden, but she never passed out of it—never went further than the elm tree—beneath which she sat long hours together, just as she used to sit before she knew Stephen, and had learnt to make her life useful.

More than once Jane tried to rouse her, but she seemed for the time being incapable of any exertion.

“It’s only now, dear, you know,” she would say, looking up piteously into her face. “Papa will soon be here to fetch me home; and when there, I will try to be good and useful, like you.” And saying this, she sighed, and bent her head down upon her hand, wondering vaguely what life would henceforth be without *him*—without his help, his love—that great love that had overshadowed her like a glory. How cold she felt without it, how alone—how deserted! She never blamed him even in thought—never said it was unkind thus to have left her without a word. He had accepted the sacrifice of both their lives;

his and hers. He was so good, so strong ; and if she was weak, the God who had brought her there to know and love him would be with her still, and help her to do right. So she sat beneath the elm tree, and bent her aching head upon her hand, and waited in meekness and patience for papa to come and fetch her home.

“ He will be here to-morrow. Don’t you think so, dear ? ” she said, on the evening of the third day. “ How glad I am that Stephen made me do what was right ; that he made me write to papa, and tell him to fetch me home. And now he will soon be here, and we shall all go back together, and he will be quite happy, and you too—just as you were, eh, Jane ? I’m afraid I have been very foolish and selfish, but no one told me ; so I couldn’t know.”

All this in a weary, listless tone ; and Jane winked away the rising tears that had in them more of anger even than of sorrow. She was angry, bitterly angry, with Mrs. MacCullan, and her son too. It was mean and cowardly of him to desert them thus, without a word—without even an attempt to see her once more. His conduct was altogether unworthy of the high esteem in which he had always been held by her, and she now despised quite as much as she had before admired him. She was angry too with herself for having led the poor little sister to open to him her heart. What would papa say ? Shame upon shame—sorrow upon sorrow. Where and how would it all end ? Tears,

angry, bitter tears, filled Jane's eyes ; but she winked them away, for Mildred must not see them.

" Only one day more to wait," Mildred went on, after a pause. " I wish I could have seen Mary Howitt, to bid her good-bye ; and there's the frock I made Mrs. Puffit's baby."

" Shall I take it her from you ?" Jane asked, briskly. Half an hour of quiet, solitary thought would be most acceptable in her present state of mind ; and as to any fear of meeting the MacCullans, it was for them to keep out of her way—not for her to keep out of theirs. If she chanced to come upon either of them, she'd speak out her mind ; she actually longed to do so—to let them know what she thought of them, and then never open her lips to them so long as she lived.

" And say good-bye for me to poor Mary. I wish you would. I can't go myself, because I might see him, you know ; and I promised that I wouldn't."

" You'd no business to promise anything of the kind ; and she had no business to—to——" Jane jumped up impetuously, and made her escape, bursting with grief and rage. Yes, she must walk down her feelings, or they'd get the upper hand of her ! So she went, and got the frock, and a book for Mary, and a whole heap of things, for her own especial protégés, of whom leave was also to be taken that day, and then started off, going at a break-neck pace ; her breast

and lip swelling, her head erect, and thrown defiantly back, for there was something of the MacCullan spirit even in sober quiet little Jane.

"Papa will be here to-morrow," Mildred said, as the garden-gate closing upon Jane, she was left alone. What made her feel so sure of this—so sure that she should not again sit there, beneath the elm tree, alone with her own thoughts, and the memories they conjured up? There was upon her the conviction of impending change. A few short hours and her life would no longer be what it had been; she felt so sure of it, though she could not have told how. It was an impression; nothing more.

"I will try to be good and useful, and always do what is right," she said; and she repeated it over and over again, as if there were comfort in the thought.

She was saying it when the little iron gate burst open, and Woolfert rushed in and up to her. Was the master there too? Her heart beat wildly, even to sickness. Had he come at last? Had he been sent to her? Should she once more feel his arms about her? Should she once more look up into his face—his eyes? Oh, how she loved him! how she had missed him—and pined for him and his love! Stephen—Stephen!

She had covered her face with her hands, but Woolfert pushed his cold nose up between them, and whined, and tried in every way to draw her attention to himself.

Some minutes still she waited—in vain; the

gate had closed to ; it would not open again. The dog had come in ; the master had passed on. She would never again see him, look up into his eyes, feel his arms about her—never, never ! Then she dropped her hands from her face, and flung them around Woolfert's neck, and cried, as she had done once before, when Woolfert's master had been angry with her. And having cried heart and eyes sore, she pressed her aching forehead down upon the dog's shaggy neck, and whispered soft, broken words, in the dog's ear.

"Will he ever know how I love him, how it nearly broke my heart to give him up ? Oh, Woolfert ! I wish I were you ; I wish I were. You can be always with him. When he looks sad you can come crouching to his feet, and kiss his hand, and show him by your mute caresses how much you love him. You can follow him in his walks, and watch by him when he sleeps ; but you can't make him happy ; would that you could, oh ! would that you could, or that I might be allowed to try."

So Mildred, through deep-drawn, dying sobs, whispered in the dog's ear, and kissed him, and clasped her arms about him. But suddenly, breaking from her with a low, sharp bark, almost of terror, he sprang to the gate, and looking up, she saw a white, weird face, with red matted locks and great burning eyes peering in at it. The eyes were fixed upon her with an intentness of gaze that drew from her a cry of mingled surprise and fear. It was repeated by a voice that seemed the very echo of her own,

only more wild, more drear; then the face vanished, suddenly, as it had appeared.

She went to the gate and looked up and down, but nothing was to be seen, nothing but the wide waste of rock, sea, and sky.

With a shudder she returned to her seat. Woolfert had gone; she was alone.

That wild, weird face, with its deathlike features, would it return again? And why had it seemed so familiar, coming to her like a vision from the dead or the phantom of a dream? Had she seen him before—had she dreamt of him? She had had so many strange dreams, that she could sometimes hardly separate the vision from the reality. And that look—that cry—what did they mean?

She was not afraid, yet she could hear the loud beating of her heart, and as she sank back among the cushions a strange feeling came over her—a faintness, a confusion of ideas. She was still very weak, and the excitement of the last few days had tried her cruelly. Her hands fell heavily to her side, her lids dropped together. Looking at her you would have said she slept, so white indeed the little face, and still, you might have thought she slept the last long sleep from which there is no awaking. But upon the vision thus closed to the outer world, had opened the yet busier world of thought, memory upon memory passing in rapid succession, until her whole life lay before her as it is said to lie before the dying. Those who have no present or future must needs live in the past. Why

did Mildred's thoughts now wander back ? Because they dared not travel forward. Better is it to dwell upon lost happiness, than upon happiness that is never to be ours.

The murmur of the sea and of the breeze that is blowing over it, sounds in Mildred's drowsy ear, but to her it is only a whisper from the past, the whisper of the winds in the giant branches of the Woodford trees. She hears it as she sits in the great, old-fashioned nursery, hugging close up in her arms the wax doll that papa has brought her from London ; and as the firelight plays over its flaxen curls, and white frock with the gay blue ribbons, she kisses it because it is so pretty. And now she is in the study at papa's feet, pouting because he writes so much and wont notice her. But he shall notice her ! So she rises to her knees, and falls to kissing his hand till he leaves off writing and smiles down on her. And the pen laid down for her sake, she leads him quite away from his work out into the garden, where the sun is shining and the birds sing.

" So foolish—so selfish," she sighs and smiles, and a tear gathers under the closed lid ; but it does not fall, for the vision has changed, and the low whispering of the wind is in her ear, the rustling of the leaves over her head. She sits in the Roslynn Wood, its shadow closing her about, its silence too—broken at last by what ? She shudders, but another vision comes stealing on—the inevitable approach of doom ! Footsteps over the frostbound earth, coming nearer and

nearer—a whisper—a breath upon her cheek, her lips; the outstretched hand, a fall, a cry! The howling of the storm in her hair, the snow in her face, the sweeping blast driving her on—whither? To a new life—to Stephen's arms—to the love that comes but once—to shame, sorrow, desertion—to the garden chair where, her head sunk back upon the cushions, worn out with emotion, she sleeps at last—and dreams.

Meanwhile Jane had been to see Mary Howitt and Mrs. Puffit's baby, to whom had been formally presented the smart new frock that Mildred had made all by herself except the cutting out. She had, moreover, been to her own especial protégés and scholars, and having treated them to a short but severe lecture, winding up with the hope that they would always be very good, which was about as much to be expected as that they would always have clean hands and pinafores, she next produced a heterogeneous assortment of New Testaments, spelling books, whipping tops, slates, warm stockings, comforters, and, reserving the best for the last, a huge packet of the most repellent-looking lollipops that ever made the mouth of a juvenile water; then feeling that she had done her duty and as much as could possibly be expected of her, she bade them all good-bye, throwing off, with her usual blunt good-nature, the thanks and blessings, not of the little ones—children are far too radical to express much gratitude for benefits conferred—but of the old,

crippled grandfather, who having but little use of his limbs, made all the more use of his tongue.

She had just left the lane leading to the cliffs and was entering the village, when who should she see right in front of her—Stephen Mac-Cullan.

“Jane!”

The indignant blood was tingling in her veins. So mean—so cowardly! She could see that he was much agitated, and her heart sickened within her. If she did not choke she would speak. He did so first, however, in the coolest and most friendly of tones.

“Just the very person I wanted,” he said, speaking rapidly, as if afraid of wasting time; “most fortunate; will you help me? This way please; but wont you take my arm, we must make haste.”

Take his arm, indeed!—she would rather have had him strike her to the earth with it.

He was walking back along the way he had come; she followed mechanically. It was her way home. What could he have to say for himself? For Mildred’s sake she waited to hear.

“How is Mildred?”

But Jane was choking, and could not answer.

“I was so sorry to have missed you the other evening, but these have been three anxious days—couldn’t leave him for fear of a relapse. His life depended upon care, even more than skill; but we’ve pulled him through, I hope, poor wretch! Did my mother get my message?”

Jane's heart gave a throb of joy. He was not mean and cowardly ; he had been away for the last three days, and knew nothing. How cruelly had she wronged him ! How happy was she to find him the noble, generous man she had always believed him to be ! She could have hugged him in her repentance and renewed affection ; but that was out of the question at the rate at which he was going, so she contented herself with less, and only begged quite humbly for the support of his arm, which she now declared would be of eminent service to her.

"That's right," he said, with one of the quick beautiful smiles that made his face such an attractive one. "We shall be there in no time."

And then he told her why he wanted her help.

CHAPTER XVI.



HE wild, wan face that had so startled Mildred was the face of Arden Graemes, who was passing once more through Badestone, having made the tour of the island, and everywhere done wonders in the way of oratory and conversions, his onward path being literally strewn with repentant prodigals, weeping Magdalens, converted sinners of every age and description. Wherever he went he saw of the travail of his soul, and was satisfied; the bent knee, a tear, a broken cry, the one reward he asked for his labours.

The tour of the island had been made, and now he was passing once more through Badestone.

When Rhoda asked him where they would be going next, he pointed to the trees, through which stirred the light autumn breeze, and answered, softly, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit! And though he continued muttering to himself long afterwards she got no clearer answer to the question that was not repeated, and that would never have been asked had she

not been so uneasy about him lately. Not that he was wilder ; on the contrary, it was long since he had had one of his mad fits upon him. He was very gentle and subdued, speaking little, and when he did speak, always holy and beautiful words that it soothed and comforted her to hear. But this very gentleness it was, joined to the unearthly transparency of the sharp, worn features, and the strange light that at times illumined them, that made her tremble for him.

Arrived at Badestone, at the same little cottage where they had lodged six weeks before, Arden drew his chair to the open window, and, leaning his head back against the sash, looked out. Keenly alive at all times to the beauties of nature, when Rhoda saw his look melt, and grow deep and dreamy, she knew that she might leave him to his own reflections. So, retiring to a corner, she drew from her pocket a coarse sock she was darning, and bent her face over it, lower and lower, until it dropped heavily upon her breast.

Arden, turning to her after awhile, found her asleep.

"Sleep on now and take your rest," he said, softly ; "the hour is at hand." And, rising, he left the room and house.

Rhoda, awaking suddenly with a start and shiver, found the room empty. She at once felt anxious, she knew not why, but she had been low and nervous all day. The landlady's little girl said she had seen the gentleman, and

he had gone that way, pointing towards the cliffs.

Rhoda threw on her shawl and bonnet, and followed the road indicated. For more than an hour she wandered about, and was returning home, thinking she might have missed him after all, when she caught sight of him not many paces off, going like one pursued, his hands clasped above his head.

"Arden—Arden!" she cried.

A turn in the path and she would lose sight of him again. Where was he going? How would she ever reach him?

He turned at her voice and stopped short. She was soon at his side, and had taken his hand into hers.

"Where have you been, dear?"

"I have seen her, Rhoda," he said, turning upon her the face over which a great change had passed, even since she saw it last. "God told me in a dream that I should see her once more before the end. Time and place are nothing to him; the one flies to meet the other at his bidding. I have seen her."

"Who, dear?"

"She with the angel face—with Maggie's face before the devil tempted her; the smile of the living, but the face of the dead! I knew that I should see her again! She came to me as the spirit of retribution once, and I said, 'The hour is come. She comes to me as an angel of mercy now, and I say again—the hour has come!'"

He was gasping, as if for breath.

"You have over-fatigued yourself," Rhoda said, anxiously. "Why did you go so fast?"

"Do you call it going fast when we put so long a time to make such a little way?" he asked, sinking back into the old dreamy tone, and letting his gaze wander away from her face, away, away, lost in the shadowy realms of thought. "Starting from a given point that we call the beginning, not knowing what else to call it; cast by the ocean of eternity upon the island of time, we wander round it, proud of the progress we appear to make, forgetful of the eternity to which we belong, and which is above, around us, its voice in our ear, its echo in our heart; on and on, until having reached the end we find that it is but the starting-point after all; the steps so weary, the heart so faint, yet the future boundless, unfathomable, as at the beginning, lying before us! Appalled we shrink from the abyss, and would fain go back along the way we came. But the end meets the beginning; the plunge is made headlong—to rise or fall! Time cannot answer the questions of eternity."

So spoke Arden Graemes, muttering the words to himself, as was his wont; and the woman at his side, anxious only to get him safely home, guided his steps, and when his limbs trembled and seemed to give way beneath him, she drew the small, wasted woman's hand within her arm and helped him on. But the wearied limbs trembled more and more, and the

solemn mutterings sank lower and lower, till they died away in faint, uncertain whisperings. Heavier, too, grew the pressure of the cold hand upon the woman's arm—heavier and heavier—until that arm, strong and protecting, was thrown around him. So would she help him on, strong where he was weak; the thin arm his support, the still frozen breast his shelter.

And as they thus walked, the man and the woman, the light of the setting sun was upon them, and lo! at their feet, side by side, hand in hand, clinging close as those who love and are faithful, their shadows laying as they had lain that day, now just a year ago, when turning on them his prophet gaze, Arden had bidden her read her fate.

Home was reached at last. On its threshold Arden Graemes paused, gathered himself together, and sending his inspired gaze out over the wild waste of rock, sea, and sky, onward and upward, as if bidding a solemn good-night to Nature, over which the grey evening shadows were closing, cried, in a loud thrilling voice, "The end of the beginning—the beginning of the end!" Then, with a sharp cry in which pain and rapture blended, he flung his arms above his head and fell heavily to the earth, which was soon dyed with his blood.

He had once more broken a blood-vessel.

Rhoda got him to bed, and the terrified landlady sent off for Doctor MacCullan, who had fortunately just returned home, and was dismounting before the porch.

One look at the senseless, almost lifeless form, told him that all help was vain; that the stranger's

hours were numbered. But though nothing could be done to save, something might yet be done to relieve him. He gave a few simple directions, then left, promising to be back in half an hour. On his way home, he chanced to fall in with Jane, as we have seen, and having told her the sad story, he asked her to go to the poor woman, who was a perfect stranger in the place, and entirely without help, except that given by the terrified landlady, who threw all her sympathy into her screams, and had nothing left for practical use.

"There's the house—I shan't be gone long. You'll remain with her till my return, wont you? Poor thing! she seems so devotedly fond of him; her husband it must be. You don't mind going in alone, eh?"

Was there anything Jane would have minded at that moment, elated as she was at the news she had to bring Mildred? She entered the cottage and knocked softly at the door pointed out to her by the little girl who stood outside as if mounting guard. As no answer came to the knock, and she feared to repeat it, she turned the handle noiselessly and entered, not however without a nervous fluttering at her heart. A bed in the further corner—a motionless female form beside it. The form rose at once on hearing the door open, and came up to it, swiftly and silently.

"Dr. MacCullan sent me here: I am a relation of his. He thought I might be of service to you. I am used to illness. If you will let me stay and help you I shall be so glad."

Jane spoke with trembling earnestness. One

look into the woman's face made her long to serve her.

The dark, hollow eyes were turned, not on her, but towards the bed as the answer came, tuneless and monotonous from the pale compressed lips—

"I always nurse him alone; he couldn't bear a stranger."

"I am so used to nursing," pleaded Jane, growing more and more anxious to have her services accepted, for the woman's face made her heart ache.

"Thank you, I always nurse him alone; he couldn't bear a stranger." The same answer in the same dull tone; and she gently pushed to the door as if nothing further had to be said or done on either side.

"What was left Jane but to retire? Which she did, after again asking if there was nothing she could do.

"Nothing, thank you; he couldn't bear a stranger." And the visitor gone, the woman closed the door behind her, and returned to her seat beside the bed.

Not for a moment did she realize that the man before her was in danger; she had seen him in just the same state before—gasping, senseless, bleeding. She had dragged him through an illness, the horrors of which were still as present to her mind as if it had been a thing of yesterday, and restored him to life, and to the world he served. Not one step, one hour did she look forward; all she now realized as she sat

beside the bed and wiped away from time to time the blood still oozing from the pale parted lips, was that the hour of supreme dread had come once more, and he and she must fight it out alone.

Doctor MacCullan was back in half an hour, as he had promised. Entering the room he glanced round it and was surprised not to see Jane.

"I sent some one here—Miss Graves—is she already gone? I thought she might be of service to you."

"I want no one; I am used to nursing him myself. He could not bear a stranger."

"Sad, beautiful devotion!" Stephen thought. "How she loves him!" And the thought of this love it was that prevented his telling her the truth. He did all that could be done. Then he sat down on the other side of the bed; he could not bear to leave her, not at least till he had told her what she must now know so soon—so soon! But to tell her which seemed impossible—so much more so than it would have done six months before—ay, or six weeks.

The man's breathing was growing fainter and fainter. Once Stephen bent forward, believing that all was over, but as he did so the eyes opened wide and fixed, and the prostrate figure rose slowly to a sitting posture like one rising from the dead—a sad and ghastly sight.

"Why do you hold me back when my hour has come, and the voices call?" he breathed in a hoarse whisper, but not to the two watchers.

"Why must we meet again this side the grave? It is deep, and from it there is no return. I told you so! Long years you haunted me, but I knew why—you led on, and I followed; and I knew that the grave your coward hands had dug was deep, and that we should not meet again until we stood face to face before God—and *her*."

A pause. The dilating eyes had fixed themselves with a look of freezing horror upon the opposite wall, seeing there what none other could see—a phantom of the disordered brain.

"I did not fear you then. I knew you could not escape me, for where your shadow fell, I followed close and sure; blood for blood, life for life! Was not the debt paid? Was not the grave deep enough to hold you? No, no!" with sudden frenzied cry. "I will not be held back by you, stretching out with uplifted arms your bleeding shroud between me and her. Oh, Maggie, Maggie, wait for me! It was for you I did it—life for life, his life for yours, Maggie, Maggie!"

The straining, agonized look, the wildly streaming hair, the muttering lips from which the slow blood still oozed, smearing and staining all around, the long thin fingers clasp and unclasping each other as if in pain—it was a ghastly sight!

Stephen, accustomed as he was in his professional career to sights from which the human flesh recoils, felt a thrill of horror run through his frame; but the woman betrayed neither horror

nor fear. She sat quite still, her eyes bent on her lap, one hand laid upon the blood-stained pillow as if in protection.

The wild despairing cry had died upon the shuddering ear. The writhed hands were slowly lifted and held out as if in supplication; then softly, gradually as he had risen, he fell back upon the pillows, and the pale lids closed over the burning eyeballs. A pulseless silence reigned throughout the room. Once more Stephen bent forward, believing that all was over, but the slow blood still oozed from the pallid lips, which moved in a faint breathless whisper. The doctor, whose face was bent down to his, did not hear it. The woman, who sat further off, and whose gaze was averted, did.

"Rhoda?"

"Yes, dear; I am here."

"Here? where? You would not desert me?"

"No, never."

"It is so dark. They are all gone—all—but you will not go. You'll stay by me to the end——"

"To the end."

He turned towards her with an effort, and raising himself slightly, leant for support against the arm that rested on his pillow, the arm she had placed there as if in protection.

"*She* wont look at me; she turns away because there's blood upon my hand." Slowly he lifted his right hand, and seemed trying to fix his dying gaze upon it. "Blood, yes, O God!

his blood ! So small a stain, so great a love ! oh, Maggie, Maggie !”

“ He’s delirious ?” Stephen said, half interrogatively.

“ Oh no ; he’s often so,” she answered, wearily.

“ You mean that he often speaks so ?” Stephen asked ; and once more the involuntary thrill of horror ran through him ; for instinctively he felt that in the ghastly words there was more than the mere raving of fever.

“ Yes, very often.”

Dr. MacCullan paused, then said in a low solemn voice, “ Would it not be as well to call in a clergyman ?”

The woman looked up in quick alarm, “ No, no !” And she bent low over the bed, half encircling the prostrate form with her disengaged arm, as if to shield him from impending danger.

“ How she loves him !” Stephen groaned, and that very love now gave him courage to tell her the truth. He took her apart, and told it her.

For the first time she looked him full in the face.

“ Dying !” she repeated, slowly. “ They said that once before, but I dragged him through. He could not die, I took such care of him.”

“ Love stronger than fear, stronger than death !” Stephen looked at the man, then at the woman, a great pity in the grey eyes.

“ No care could avail him now, and I fear he has something on his mind.”

He fixed on her the keen piercing eyes. The woman who so loved must know him even as he knew himself.

"If he has, the secret lies between him and God." There was something of reproach in the words, and the tone in which they were uttered. Then slowly and quietly she returned to the bed to which the dying voice had called her.

No outburst of grief, no despairing cry, no wringing of the hands, no tears, but the same dead calm as before, the same inscrutable look in the hollow eyes.

"What has eternity to do with the things of time?" cried the dying man, breaking out once more. "Blood for blood, life for life! Time called it retribution! Eternity has found for it another name—Murder!"

"Murder!" The word was echoed by the doctor's lips, from which it broke involuntarily, a cry of horror.

"Don't listen to him. Oh! for God's sake, don't!" The woman was roused at last, and sinking down beside the bed, held out her arms to the stranger in wild supplication. "Don't listen to him, he knows not what he says. He is not wicked, he never was. Oh no, he is not wicked, he is only mad—mad!"

So the secret that despair had held close and through so many months, it betrayed at The stranger's look of mingled doubt and had not escaped those watchful eyes. Moved the dying husband guilty; better him what he really was—mad.

The word, sharp and despairing, caught the ear of the dying man, and the dying voice replied to it sad and solemn.

"No, Rhoda; not mad—not mad now. I have walked amid the dark places of the earth, where the air was heavy with the foul thoughts and deeds of men, and it pressed upon my heart and brain, and its weight was more than I could bear; it almost drove me mad. Only in the hour of prayer—in the early dawn, when sin and sorrow slept, the cloud was lifted from my soul. I saw it rise and disperse—a black and hideous mass—and then—and then——" A wild, rapturous light illumined the haggard features, then died out of them. "Heaven is nearer to us than we suppose; it is very near to me at this hour, but I cannot see it. I cannot die with the burden of crime upon my soul."

"There is something he wishes to confess," Stephen said to himself; then he looked at the man and paused. One hour left to him of life. If he now went to the Rector, neither would in all probability be back in time. He stooped over the pillow. "You have something on your mind. God calls upon you to confess it, that you may die in peace."

"Are you the voice of God?" asked the dying man, dreamily, half turning to where the voice had proceeded. But before Stephen could answer the woman had risen, and laying her hand upon the heaving breast as if to still the tumultuous throbbings that death was soon to still for ever, she turned upon the stranger almost fiercely,

like some poor hunted creature brought to bay at last.

"What right have you to come here and trouble his last hours? Stricken by the hand of God, let Him judge and condemn. What have you done—what have you suffered that you dare speak so to him, the saint and the martyr!" The strong man shrank back abashed before the woman's passionate outburst of scorn and reproach; before those flashing eyes, those writhing lips which spoke so much more eloquently than words. What right had that man standing before her in all the strength, the glory of his manhood, to judge the dying, broken-hearted husband, the criminal and the martyr! It was a noble light that shone forth from Rhoda Graemes's eyes, and Stephen himself was abashed by it. "Has he not suffered enough, that you, a stranger, dare speak to him of repentance? He has saved thousands of living souls. If he cannot save his own, the God he has served in the midst of so much sorrow will. What can you know of his past that you dare reproach him with it, or try to force from his dying lips the secret that has cost him his life. Go your way, and thank God that you have not been tried as he has been. If he has a confession to make it is not to such as you."

"Confession!" broke in the dying man, in an awed whisper, and raising himself once more on to his elbow, he passed his hand over the death-shadowed brow, wiping from it the sweat of agony, mental as well as physical. "Yes, yes, I will confess."

"Arden, Arden," came the woman's despairing cry.

"The confession of the dying is sacred. Don't you see that he can't die in peace till he has spoken? Let him unburden his heart; it will be such a comfort to him, and to you too, afterwards."

And the young doctor as he spoke looked so good and pitying, and true withal, that the woman was silenced, and Arden Graemes made the confession without which he could not die in peace.

There was no mistaking his words, they were startlingly, awfully distinct and clear; and Stephen listened, at first pitying, then wondering, then with bated breath and strained, eager interest. Had he not listened to the same story before, in almost the same words, in almost the same voice—so soft, so musical, so solemn? Vengeance on the coward soul for confidence misplaced, faith betrayed; the false vow, the dishonouring embrace. The victory of the weak over the strong, the outstretched hand—a fall—a cry; and the storm driving the murderer on. Strange and awful fatality, strange and awful resemblance between those two predestined lives.

The confession was at an end; a deathlike silence reigned around. Had the last words been spoken? Had the lips closed for ever? No, memory was very busy and would not be silenced. Arden Graemes spoke again, but to himself only, not his hearers.

"Yes, yes, I tracked him from place to place,
VOL. III.

[illegible]

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The confession was at an end. A silence reigned around. Had the man spoken? Had the lips closed? The story was very busy and would not stop. Green spoke again, but

ed him from ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~of~~ ^{to} ~~Shana,~~

following the stealing shadow where it fled along the earth, close and sure, until I tracked him home—home! She had no home—he drove her from it—from her home to her grave—from his home to his grave. The shadow of the past united them like a bridge, and over it he passed, and I followed.”

A shuddering pause. So low and horror-filled the tones of the dying voice; so rapt and intent the gaze of those unearthly gleaming eyes, that involuntarily the listener lived over again with him the terrors of that one dark hour.

“I knew that the end was near. I knew why darkness covered the earth that day when the sun went down; wind and snow were in my face driving me back, but I saw and followed. Where it led, I followed; where it stopped, I stopped, and there I found *her*.”

The last word fell so softly, so softly, and the eyes, over which the death-weighted lids were slowly sinking, moved on along the white-washed wall, as if turning to some vision less ghastly than the rest.

“She with the angel face—with Maggie’s face before *he* tempted her. She sat where the storm could not touch her, sleeping so sweetly; but his baleful shadow fell over and covered her; then it passed on, but I did not follow. Her hair was bright like Maggie’s, and her hand as small and soft; and she slept so sweetly—slept whilst his evil shadow was passing over her life, and storm and murder were abroad. I stood between him and her. When I turned I saw

him, near to her, nearer still to the yawning chasm, looking in. Is the coward life worth a struggle? A fall—a cry—the struggle that comes too late to save! Her death was to be his. God told me so! And——” he added, after a pause, the dying voice, dropping to a faint, uncertain whisper, “he told me that I should see her once more before the end came. And I saw her to-day—I looked in through the gate and saw her. Her eyes were heavy with the tears the innocent have to shed for the sins of others; and her face was pale and still, like Maggie’s face when I saw it last. When she looked at me I knew what the look meant, that the end was near—that my hour had come!”

It would, indeed, seem that it had, for a convulsive shudder ran quivering through his frame; but it was a shudder of ecstasy, not failing strength, for at the same moment a great unearthly light broke over his face; the pale head was slowly raised, and the voice that had so often thrilled and awed the multitude cried aloud whilst the fire of inspiration relit the dying preacher’s eyes—

“Down on your knees and bow your heads to the earth, for the Spirit of God is passing through the room!”

At his command the man and woman bowed their heads, and a silence that might be felt dropped with strange and solemn meaning upon each listening heart.

It was broken at last by a deep heart-weary sigh. Arden Graemes had sunk back upon the

pillows, and the voice in which he next spoke was so faint as to be almost inaudible.

"It is enough. I would be alone—with death, and the woman who was given to me!"

Stephen MacCullan, knowing that nothing more was to be done, that the end was now close at hand, rose without a word, and passed out of the room. When once more in the open air, beyond the awe-inspiring influence of that death-bed scene, he staggered like one drunk. Mystery crowding upon mystery, tragedy upon tragedy; no wonder that the strong man's brain reeled! But he must keep it clear for Mildred's sake. If he could but collect his thoughts, be calm in the midst of so much bewildering confusion, realize as a simple fact what he had just now heard! Where should he go?—to whom speak? To his mother? No; he must have mastered himself and the situation before he could meet her. Jane? Yes; he would go to her—ask to see her alone. She was so quiet, so sensible, and then she knew all. Yes, he would go to Jane.

Meanwhile Arden Graemes, the celebrated preacher, after whom all England ran, of whom the whole world loved to speak, was left alone with the woman who alone out of all the world had reason to curse that pure devoted life, and the man who had so cruelly wronged her—who alone had clung to him close and faithful to the last. She knelt beside the pillow; once she had tried to take the hand that lay so listlessly upon the coarse woollen coverlet, but he had drawn

it gently away, folding it over the other on his breast; and meekly, afraid of disturbing those last solemn moments, she had moved further down to the foot of the bed, where she now knelt and waited—for what? She did not ask herself this, but she felt glad—oh, so glad!—that she had been tender and true to him through all; that she had not forsaken or cursed him—that she had nothing to reproach herself with now that the end had come.

The end! What had she to wait for but that? The pale, blood-stained hands, already folded in the dread repose of death—the wide-open eyes, with their intent, far-off gaze. Could aught of earth disturb the soul upon which already opened the visions of eternity?

Slowly the blue, solemn eyes returned from the measureless distance of abstraction, and fell upon the woman, who, with face low bowed and hidden, knelt so meekly at the foot of the bed, faithful to the end. And resting on her they grew wistful and troubled. He must speak to her once more, before death parted them for ever.

“You have been very good to me—very, very good. It was God who sent you to me—wasn’t it, Rhoda?—who told you to follow me—who gave you to me, my one comfort, amid so much pain and sorrow! It was not I who stole you by fair words from your happy home, from your parents’ love, from all that made your young life so bright and beautiful?”

“Never mind that now, dear.”

"No, never mind it now," he echoed, solemnly, though his gaze was wistful and troubled still. "One year out of a lifetime; was it so very hard, Rhoda?"

"God gave me strength to bear it, dear; I did my best."

"You will be glad to think of that when the rest is forgotten; looking back you will say that it was well, you would not have it otherwise."

"No, I would not have it otherwise."

"Mother once said that I had wronged you—and—your face is no longer what it was when I first saw and called you; but God would not have let me wrong you. The life of devotion and self-sacrifice is hard, but it is sublime. The Mother of God was young and blooming and happy as you once were, Rhoda, when the Spirit of Love descended and overshadowed her. She was never happy again, but she was blest, and she——" He paused; a film had gathered over the wide-open, shadowy eyes. The voice, growing fainter and fainter, had sunk into a whisper so low as to be almost inaudible; but the woman still listened for it in meek and tearless silence, and after awhile it went on, "You did not curse me—you were very good to me always. May God reward you, and—forgive me—good-bye, Rhoda—through all eternity."

"Through all eternity?"

There was nothing of reproach in the words, but they sounded so drear and desolate.

"As it opens upon me, you—fade from my sight. You were a great help to me, a great

comfort, too ; but I need help and comfort no more. With time die all sentiments but the real—the *real*. Yes, yes, I see it all now ; you were very good to me ; but in eternity my soul will not seek yours nor yours mine. You will be with those you love, and I shall have found *her*. Good-bye.”


If he would but have given her one look before the heavy death-weighted eyes closed for ever—one last look in return for so much devotion—a pressure of the hand—one fond regretful word ! But she felt that what he said was true—that his prophet gaze saw clearer, oh, how much clearer than her own bounded vision ! so she bowed her face down upon the coverlet, and was silent.

“The end of the beginning—the beginning of the end ; time, the preface to the great Work of Eternity. Can we count the stars of heaven, each star a world, each world higher than the last ; nothing lost, not a thought, an aspiration, an effort—retribution, justice, life—life ! One step farther—higher—nearer to the light.”

* * * *

Had light indeed broken in upon the darkened soul at last ? Rhoda, knowing that the end had come, that the last words had been spoken, looked up, and saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

CHAPTER XVII.

HAT Stephen was not mean and cowardly and unkind, Jane had told Mildred, as she had believed; yes, as she had positively believed, for he had been away three days and knew nothing of that interview with his mother.

Mildred did not say that she was glad to hear this, but she put both arms round Jane's neck and kissed her; when she spoke next it was of papa, not Stephen.

"He'll be here to-morrow, I'm so sure he will, and then he'll take me home, and I'll try to be good and useful and do always what is right. But I mustn't see *him* again, dear, you know. I must never see him again, unless she sends him to me, and she won't do that, for she thinks me so very wicked and unworthy of his love."

Jane muttered something between her teeth, not altogether complimentary to Stephen's mother; and then, to turn the conversation, she told Mildred of her visit to Mary Howitt, to the baby, who looked so pretty in the smart new frock, of the fisherman's grandchildren, and last of all, of the strange visit she had made to the dying man, and the poor young woman who would not accept of her services.

"If some one I loved were dying, I could not bear the presence of a stranger," Mildred answered, musingly; "I would be alone with him. Was she his wife, do you think?"

Jane supposed she was, but could not of course be sure. Stephen had said they were strangers in the place, having only arrived there that day.

"To die!"

"Yes; Stephen said that there was no hope; that his hours were numbered, and that he looked dreadful; his long hair clotted with blood, and his great wide open eyes fixed and glassy."

"I know, I saw him," Mildred broke in, as if speaking to herself; so pale and thin and wild—oh, so dreadfully wild! I saw him."

"Impossible, child! Where? He only arrived to-day."

"I saw him to-day when you were gone. He looked in through the gate at me. Yes, he looked dreadful!" Mildred shuddered. "I wish I had not seen him!" she breathed, then added, hastily, "or that I could be of use to him."

Poor child! she had not forgotten Stephen's lessons; and, if she still shuddered at the thought of suffering, she no longer shrank from the thought of relieving it.

Several times that evening, as the two sisters sat together, Mildred would start, flush; then glance towards the door, bending her head in a listening attitude.

"For whom are you listening, dear?" Jane

asked at last. "Papa would never arrive so late; he could not, you know."

"Oh no, of course not."

But still she started, and flushed, and listened.

Jane, sitting at the window, saw Stephen enter the garden. Afraid of alarming Mildred, she rose quietly, and went out to meet him.

"He knows all now," she thought, as with beating heart she passed noiselessly down the stairs. "His mother has told him all, and he comes at once. I knew he would."

She was gone about half an hour, when she returned Mildred looked sharply round, her cheek flushed, her lip tremulous, her eyes eager, and full of a great wistfulness.

"He has been here, I know; I heard his voice. Does he know all?"

"Yes, he knows all; more than you or I, or any one else but God."

Then she dropped on her knees beside Mildred's chair, and told her the story that Arden Graemes had told Stephen not two hours before—the strange, improbable story, which he had yet felt to be truth.

As Jane now repeated it in her simple, straightforward fashion, making it as short and concise as possible, Mildred broke in from time to time, eagerly, fearfully, with faint, uncertain whisperings, like one groping amid the darkness over familiar ground.

"Sitting under the tree, her head leant against it, fast asleep—was that I, Jane?"

"Yes, dear; you fell asleep, and had that strange, dreadful dream, and the cry awoke you, and you ran away, thinking that all was quite true, when it was only a dream; and afterwards, when poor Mr. Reeves was really found dead, you believed that it was you who had killed him. Stephen explained all this to me."

Jane stopped short, for Mildred had turned frightfully pale, and the white parted lips seemed struggling in vain to utter some articulate sound. Jane brought a glass of water, but she pushed it gently aside; then a change as of death passed over her face. There was a convulsive shiver, a piteous look up at Jane, as if imploring help; then, with a sharp, despairing cry, she sank in a heap to the ground. Had joy broken the poor little heart that shame and sorrow had scarce had power to overshadow? Jane tried to raise her, speak to her, soothe her, but passionately she pushed her aside.

"I have borne it so long," she gasped, the voice coming faint and broken from between the hands with which she had covered her face, as if ashamed of the storm of passion that was sweeping over it. "I knew it was the irrevocable, and I bore it. When it made papa and you so unhappy—when it made me leave home, when it made Stephen angry with me, and made me wish to die, when it made his mother curse me, and take him away from me for ever, I bore it still; it could never be undone, never forgotten—so I must bear it, and I did, and it did not break my heart, but now—now——"

Jane understood the agony of hope that was harder to bear than even the certainty of sorrow that brings with it resignation.

Stephen, on leaving Cliff Terrace, went straight home, and into his mother's room, preventing her telling him her story by telling her his.

Tormented as she had been the last three days by doubts, fears, and regrets, she was only too glad to have the mystery cleared up, and the poor little culprit cleared. This might have been done in a more commonplace, satisfactory manner certainly. That she should have dreamt herself guilty of the murder perpetrated by another was rather a strange solution; but it was a solution, and as such she caught at it eagerly. Dreams, portents, and second sight were rife in the MacCullan family, and Mildred was a MacCullan after all. The terrible trial that had threatened her son's life, and hers through him, had passed even before it had touched him. Once more her prayer had been answered, in so strange and mysterious a manner too, when faith and love had both despaired.

How hard and cruel had sounded at the mother heart the words with which for his sake she had schooled herself to meet him. "Choose between her and me. The curse of blood and of your mother be upon you if ever you see her again."

Now, almost kneeling at his feet as Mildred had so lately knelt at hers—in vain, she said to him, "Go to her, and tell her that I sent you."

"Not to-night, mother," laughed Stephen; "I'm afraid that at this hour I should not be

admitted into the house, or if I were it would be with no more interesting result than a closer acquaintance with Mrs. Morton's night-cap than I at all care for.

But even as he said this laughingly, Stephen stopped short and sighed, thinking of that distant cottage, and the lonely watcher beside the dead. Two lives, his and hers, ending there—sleep for the one, the stupor of despair for the other; the love that was so weak to save, so strong to suffer, mourning in the utter abandonment of woe the attainment of that for which alone the immortal soul lived and loved and suffered. Death had come very near to Stephen Mac-Cullan too once—come, and passed on.

CHAPTER XVIII.



MRS. and Dr. MacCullan sat at breakfast the day after the events above recorded, when there came a tap at the door, and Stephen, going to open it, saw the woman last seen in the chamber of death.

"He's dead!" she said, briefly, and looking him full in the face.

Stephen knew it only too well. He would not mock her grief by idle professions of sympathy or pity, but both spoke out plainly enough in the grey eyes. They were upon her face, but he could read there neither horror nor despair. It was worn, as if with long watchings and anxiety; but there were no traces of actual suffering or emotion.

"I did all I could. I was with him to the last—the very last. He does not want me any longer. My duty is over, and—I'm going home."

Something in the words, but even more in the tone in which they were uttered, jarred painfully on the doctor's ear.

"You are his wife?" he said, hesitatingly, almost inclined, for the first time, to doubt it.

"I was."

The tone seemed one of grave rebuke for the needless question.

"I was his wife, but he does not want me any more. There is nothing more to be done. My duty is over. I am going home."

Home! What home could there be for the wife but the dead husband's side, until the grave should part them?

"You are leaving Badestone now—before the funeral?"

"Yes."

Dr. MacCullan stared at her in bewildered amaze. Leaving the sacred watch over the dead to strangers! There was in the very thought something so unholy, so unnatural, that he could scarce believe that he had heard aright. But a look into the woman's face prevented any further remark.

Her eyes still meeting his, she drew from beneath her shawl a roll of papers.

"They say you are a good and honourable man; I believe it. I give you these papers; he left nothing else behind. His mother will be here to-morrow. I have telegraphed for her."

She paused, and something of the unnatural hardness passed out of her voice and face as she resumed—

"You will be kind to her when she comes. She is weak and broken, and needs comfort, she has suffered so much! But she is *his* mother, and—I must go to mine. You will tell her that I did all I could, that I was with him to the last—the very last, and only went away when he no longer wanted me—when there was nothing more to do. She must have these papers, and

this letter. Tell her that his death was beautiful, and be good to her, for she's suffered so much."

Stephen opened his lips to speak, but by a look she silenced him.

"She's his mother, and she loved him; but she doesn't know what he told you yesterday, and you wouldn't make her sorrow greater by telling it her now he's dead."

"If you could wait to see her, it would be such a comfort to her, I'm sure; and she's your husband's mother."

"Yes; she's *his* mother, and I must go to mine. I have done my best, and now my duty's over, and I'm going home."

Dull, cold, and monotonous the woman's voice had sounded from first to last, for these were her last words. She advanced to the table, laid the papers down upon it, and left the room.

On the outside of the roll was written, in large, bold characters—"To be given to my mother after my death. Arden Graemes."

Mrs. MacCullan's eyes falling upon it involuntarily, she echoed the name with a sharp cry of dismay and horror, and pointed it out, with trembling hand, to her son, who stood looking down upon it in bewildered incredulity. The criminal, the maniac, the poor forsaken dead—Arden Graemes—the courted, the celebrated, the worshipped—whose name, more perhaps than any other borne by man, rang through the world! Impossible! And again, with pale scared looks, the two, mother and son, bent over the words so awfully, unmistakably distinct.

"I knew that I had seen her before," Stephen's mother said at last, and her lips as she spoke were still white and trembling; "but I could not make out when and where. And he is dead—Arden Graemes is dead!"

And, solemnly and sadly, his fascinated gaze still fixed upon the magic name, Stephen answered, "Yes."

The papers were locked away as a sacred deposit to be given into the mother's hands, and then Stephen, thinking he might yet prevent the woman's immediate departure, went at once to the cottage; but, arrived there, he found that the wife so faithful in life, so faithless in death, had indeed left the place, and the dead to be watched over by strangers, or to lie unwatched. So Dr. MacCullan found him now. Arden Graemes—the run after, the famous, the adored—the criminal, the maniac, the martyr, and the saint—alone, and forsaken; the thin, meek hands folded over his breast, the wild eyes closed for ever, and so too the solemn lips from which had poured such frenzied bursts of eloquence. All still now, all at rest—brain and body and mind. Well might the woman say that nothing more was to be done, that she could leave him to death, and go her way. Some hours sooner or later, what mattered it!

The living draw closer together as they leave the dead alone.

All that day, and the next, and again the next after that, through the long bright autumn

mornings, and the long bright afternoons, while the living huddled close together, keeping as far away as possible, the dead lay alone. But when the sun had set, and the day was no longer bright, when the evening shadows stole over the earth, at almost the same hour when the preacher's voice had called down the blessing of God upon the darkened storm-tossed soul, the door of the room where he lay would open softly, and a woman would come in, lift the fair linen cloth from the hushed, solemn face; bend to kiss, with light, reverent lips, the folded hands, and then kneel down beside the coffin, watching there until the deepening shadows closed over the two motionless forms, one scarce less motionless than the other.

So the dead had found a watcher, and the woman in those silent, solemn watchings found—her God.

The mother, who had been sent for, came at last, very weak and broken, as Arden Graemes's wife had said. But she did not mourn as doting mothers mourn an only child; she did not weep or fret, but she looked very scared and frightened, and seemed anxious only to creep away out of sight.

The day after the funeral Dr. MacCullan remitted to her the papers, the very mention of which had so unnerved and agitated her that he had purposely refrained giving them her until all was over.

He laid them in her lap as she sat in the farthest corner of the room, where Arden, her

son, had bled and raved and agonized, and died at last the death that the woman who was with him to the last had called beautiful. She gazed down upon them with a blank, frozen stare, then suddenly pushed them away with a look of abject terror.

"Take them away—oh, please take them away—I don't want to see them—I can't—I dare not! He's dead now, so what does it matter—what does anything matter? His poor father left them, and I locked them away, and afterwards I gave them to him, for he was so good and clever, and such a comfort to me then; I could never bear to open them—now he's dead, and who knows what may be in them?" she added, her teeth literally chattering in her head, with nervous terror. "Anyhow I shouldn't know what to do with them."

"You would wish them put into a lawyer's hands, perhaps?"

She gave another nervous start, and looked more and more piteous and miserable.

"A lawyer—did you say a lawyer?—oh, please don't give them to a lawyer; who knows what may be in them, and he's dead now, and his poor father too; and—I'm sure I don't know what I should do with them, and I couldn't bear that a lawyer should see them, for who knows what may be in them—and he's dead now, you know, and the very look of them makes me feel so nervous."

"But your son was a great man," Stephen

said, bowing his head, almost reverently, as his eye fell once more on the magic name, the name of the world-famed preacher. "His papers may be of value to posterity."

"A great man, my poor boy! oh dear no, he was not great, he was only—but it doesn't matter now he's dead, and I can't be frightened or miserable about him any more; and I should never know what to do with all that heap of papers—I couldn't carry them about with me, and who knows what may be in them!"

Stephen MacCullan saw plainly enough that there was no reasoning with a mind so hopelessly weak; and he looked from the rejected papers to the vague, miserable face, and back again, in great perplexity.

"If you'd just look them over yourself, or burn them, or put them by. Miss Rhoda says in her letter that you're so good, and that I'm to tell you all, and you'll help me. And I'm sure it would be a great comfort to me, for I couldn't bear to read them, or keep them either. And he's dead, so nothing can harm him now, and I would rather that all should be forgotten and buried with him."

"But you overlook the fact that in these papers there may be family secrets that——"

"Family secrets—we have no family. We were only two, he and I—and Miss Rhoda says that I'm to trust you, and God knows I do, for I have no one else; and if you'd just take and read them I should be very grateful, and——" But her nervous trepidation had reached its

climax, and she broke off, unable to utter another word.

Then Stephen, having the same faith in himself that she had in him, thought it might after all be as well that he should take the matter into his own hands; so after a few soothing words to the poor broken-hearted mother, he carried off the papers, and going straight home locked the door of his room behind him, and broke the seal with a hand less steady than usual, and a strange feeling of awe and hesitation; for was he not trespassing upon the sacred rights of the dead?

The first thing upon which his eye fell was a little tear-stained, scarce legible note—Maggie's letter home, after her desertion of it.

Stephen dropped it hastily, almost with horror, as though it had been some hurtful thing. Then reverently he picked it up, laid it aside, and for some time paced up and down the room, terribly agitated.

A new and horrible thought had struck him—a thought that made his heart swell and his brain reel. What if the murderous hand had not been outstretched—if the messenger of vengeance had not gone forth to meet the man on the very spot where the little love sat waiting for him? Mildred, his darling, so innocent, so pure, would have taken the place in that bad man's heart and life, that had of right belonged to the poor dead sister, whose hideous fate had driven the brother mad. Almost hating him, she would have been his for life! given up to his mercy, his

victim and his wife. Nothing but death could have saved her, and it had come in the very moment when she had gone forth to seal her doom. If that sudden blow had not been struck she was lost—lost to happiness and to him. He threw open the window, for he felt faint and giddy. What was, and what might have been, stood out in startling contrast—thought was clear, but the strong mind for awhile seemed darkened by the too eager effort to grasp it. How wonderfully had all things, good and evil, worked together, bringing forth the desired end ; leading them on, step by step, by such opposite and mysterious ways until they had found each other.

And there, in his lonely grave, unwept, unmourned, lay the man, the criminal and the martyr who had saved her, and blest him, the proud, self-dependent Stephen MacCullan, who had never, through all his stern chequered life, either asked or accepted aught from any man's hand !

Thoughts there are that are almost more than we can bear, that bow the pride of man to the dust, and declare him the weak predestined creature he is.

Stephen drew a deep breath, and his heavy brows gathered themselves together over his eyes, hiding them away, and the troubled look that was in them. His skill and care, joined to the blessing of God, had once saved his little love from death ; but another, and that other a stranger, a murderer, a madman, had saved her

too, and from a fate worse than death—how much worse?

If the world were to hear of that dark night's work it would curse the murderer and the deed of blood; but could he, Stephen MacCullan, the just, the honourable, the upright, curse the man who had saved his future wife, and made two lives blest? Oh! the unfathomable mystery of human life! The poor dead sister in her unhallowed grave, within sound of the hideous din and roar of the monster city whose sin and sorrow had broken her heart! the poor mad brother in his lonely grave within sound of the solemn roar of the waters whose voice had called him to death and confession; not for his own sake, for his sin, as his sorrow, was safe in God's keeping, and would never be brought up against him; but for the sake of those two young lives which he had blest! Well, he rested at last where the hand of retribution could not touch him; having accomplished so much, suffered so much, he rested in peace at last; and whatever the guilt that had blackened his life though it could not darken his soul, his memory would be held sacred by one who pitied but dared not condemn.

Stephen's brow cleared, and he returned to the examination of the papers.

But a fresh shock awaited him, as great as any that had gone before. Among the papers was a packet of letters, dating many years back, evidently addressed to the dead man's father; cruel, unforgiving letters they were, full of angry bitterness, and they were addressed to Graemes

MacCullan, Esq., and were signed MacCullan, with various Christian names, male and female, thereto affixed.

Stephen had in his younger days heard too much of the MacCullan family troubles not to realize the truth at once. The dead man's father was that Graemes MacCullan of whom he had often heard the Scotch aunts speak with so much scorn and rancour—the brother of Mildred's mother, and a distant relation of his own; and Arden Graemes, the celebrated preacher—the murderer, the maniac, was a MacCullan too! Strange fatality—strange, awful winding up of the proud family chronicles in that one branch at least—dishonour, crime, and an early and tragic death. And through all those years, when he, Stephen, had believed himself the last representative of the family, there had lived another MacCullan who might have made the name that he had held so sacred and free from stain, both famous and infamous.

Yes, a strange fatality indeed it was, that Arden MacCullan, who had dropped altogether from the family chronicles, was yet fated to exert, unconsciously to himself, so great an influence over the family destinies. By a crime that would have disgraced any name, however honourable, he had saved the innocent cousin and blessed the life of the proud, self-dependent relation. By the genius that would have given celebrity to any name, however mean, he had bowed to the dust the pride of the haughty woman who would have scorned to see in him a relative, and who

yet had knelt at his feet, her head bent low, even to the ground.

Stephen, rising at last from his seat, dazed and bewildered, felt the ground of clear common-sense giving way beneath his feet. The atmosphere of mystery that surrounded seemed to stifle him. And to think of Mildred—the woman he loved and wished to make his wife—being mixed up in it, so enveloped in a cloud of startling and mystic facts that she herself appeared all at once unreal and shadowy, a vision of the excited brain rather than a blessing granted to a life! Would the mystery end there?—or was it to follow her on and on, darkening her life, and his too, when their fates for good or for evil should be united?

Stephen certainly felt anything but comfortable; and his clear mind, shrinking instinctively from the inexplicable, he for one moment shrank from the thought of the mystic union that had so strangely been brought about.

But love got the better of reason, as it always does; and when drawing another deep breath he shook back the hair from his eyes, those eyes were as calm as ever; but there was in them a look they had never had before, for in that hour he had for the first time realized the actual existence of a power greater than any of which he could boast, controlling and overruling his destiny; and though the thought did not frighten, it awed him.

CHAPTER XVIII.



STEPHEN told his mother of the strange discovery he had made, and her surprise equalled, if it did not exceed his.

"How strange that the papers should thus have fallen into your hands, you who alone had the right to read them," she said at last, when she had sufficiently collected her senses to frame a connected sentence.

"Yes, it is strange."

"And that the secret of his crime should be known only to the family to which he belonged, and the wife who will hold it sacred for her own sake—an extraordinary coincidence!"

"Extraordinary," Stephen echoed, abstractedly.

"And Mildred—why, she's his cousin—his first cousin, and her mother so loved his father—they thought it would break her heart when he ran away and was cast off by the family; and now I come to think of it he *had* something of the MacCullan in him. And that poor little Mildred should be mixed up in it! and actually take his crime upon herself. It seems quite incredible!"

The grey eyes were slowly raised from the ground, to which they had sunk at the first

mention of Mildred's name. It evidently cost him an effort to look his mother calmly in the face, as he said, in a grave, subdued tone—

“At first I did not myself half like the idea of Mildred being mixed up in so much mystery and sorrow; it gave me a feeling of insecurity, a fear for her future and mine. But I conquered the feeling; it has passed, never to return. There are mysteries in life that we cannot and should not try to fathom. No life can stand alone; one event is interwoven with another, one fate drawn insensibly to another. Who knows if just as much of mystery does not lie in half the lives that surround us, if only we could see them acted out, and all their mysteries cleared up? I don't think there's anything in all this to frighten us or make us anxious for the future; on the contrary, it should make us grateful, very grateful, for the past. I've tried to think the matter over calmly, for Mildred's connexion with so much mystery, sin, and sorrow, troubled and bewildered me. But I don't mean to recall the past again, except to be thankful for it.”

He spoke humbly, in a tone very different from his usual proud independence of thought and reasoning. The struggle had been a severe one, but the cloud of fear and mistrust that had fallen between him and Mildred had slowly risen and passed away, as he had said, for ever. It was a point seriously discussed between mother and son, whether poor weak-minded Mrs. Graemes should be told of the discovery that had been made of the relationship that existed between

them. The stern, fastidious MacCullan pride revolted at the thought, but the woman's heart approved it. Poor childless widow! alone, so utterly alone in her helplessness and sorrow, to know that she had relations willing to own and befriend her might be a comfort, and she needed comfort sorely enough, as Arden's wife had said.

So Frances MacCullan went to her, and told her that all the proud Scotch relatives of her dead husband, who had been so harsh and cruel, driving him to desperation, were dead too, that no one was left of the whole family but herself and her son, who, knowing all, honoured the memory of the dead, and only asked to be allowed to help and comfort her.

The poor mother said but little, and that little was broken and confused; but Mrs. MacCullan saw that she had guessed aright, that it was a comfort to her in her loneliness and helplessness to have found those who, knowing all, still thought kindly of the dead, and were willing to own her as Arden's mother; with whom the secret of that buried life was safe, from whom she had nothing to fear. Yes, it was a comfort, and her looks if not her words said so.

One other comfort Frances MacCullan gave the bereaved mother. She told her in all humility what the dead son had done for her, and not for her only, but for thousands such as she.

"I owe him more than my life," she added, deeply moved; "but for him I should have died

as I have lived all these years—the best of my life. He saved me from worse than death—he saved me from myself, and I shall bless him and his work to my dying day.”

“Thank you,” said Arden’s mother; then she looked up, wistfully, into the dark face, over which swept alternate storm and calm. “He was always very good—always. I told Miss Rhoda so; he never would have harmed her or any one—only he was mad!”

Frances MacCullan shrank in pain from the word spoken with such dreary calmness.

“Yes, yes, I know,” she interrupted, hastily. “God, for His own inscrutable purposes, allowed his mind to be for awhile darkened and overcast; but he was none the less one of His chosen servants. A man is not to be judged by the sorrows of his life, but by its work; and that his work was blessed thousands can testify. If he suffered much he also accomplished much. He was a great and good man, a son of whom any mother might be proud.”

“Thank you,” again repeated Arden’s mother. “I was proud of him once, very proud, and so was his poor papa. He was such a pretty boy, and so good and clever; and we were both so proud of him! His papa always said that he would live to be a great man, and make for himself a name, much greater than that of which the proud family who had cast him off, so vainly boasted, and so I thought he would.”

“And so he has!” cried Frances MacCullan, realizing for the first time the utter worthlessness—

ness of all merely hereditary titles. "What other name in England is greater, more world-famed than that of Arden Graemes? His father was right."

A sudden flash of mingled joy and pride lighted up once more the careworn, hopeless face, restoring to it momentary youth and beauty.

"Was he? Oh dear me, I am so glad! I couldn't bear to think that all his cleverness and goodness were for nothing, as I'm sure I thought they were. And when you speak so, I seem to forget all the sad things that came after, and see him only as he was, so pretty and good and clever, when we were both so proud of him. And now that he's dead, and you know all, and there's nothing more to frighten me—for I was always so afraid of his being taken from me and locked up in a madhouse, where he would have broken his heart—I shall like to think of him again. And it's a great comfort to me all you say of him, for you're of the family and should know."

She put out her hand as if to touch her new-found relative, but ere it had reached her drew it hastily back, hiding it away beneath her apron.

A grey stone cross, massive and tall, marks the spot where Arden Graemes lies. Arden Graemes—yes, that is the name the stone bears. Stephen it was who decided that it should be so. Not from any feeling of family pride or personal consideration, but because he would not rob the

dead of that which the living had rendered famous ; and also because, like his mother, he fully realized how little worth having was the name that no great or good deed had ever ennobled, compared with that borne by the itinerant preacher. Though the inspired lips were for ever silent, to how many would the simple words on the grey stone cross still speak of warning, comfort, and encouragement ? And looking upward from the grave to the heaven of which he had so often spoken with solemn rapture, the trembling soul would bless the name of

ARDEN GRAEMES.



CHAPTER XIX.



MILDRED'S little note to Dr. Graves brought him at once to Badestone, where he arrived the day after Arden Graemes's death. That that same note had left him terribly anxious and uneasy in his mind may be imagined. What could have happened since he left the place to work so sudden and extraordinary a change? Could it be that she was ill again or in trouble? Had there been anything between her and Stephen? An explanation, perhaps; and if so, why had not Jane written, or at least added a line?

He hardly knew whether to be glad or only anxious. The more he thought the matter over, the greater grew his uneasiness. When at last he caught sight of the pretty white cottage, slumbering so peacefully amid the evening shadows, suspense had deepened to actual agony. But before he was fairly out of the carriage, Mildred was there, her arms about his neck. Her first words, sharp as a cry, were—

"Oh, papa, I didn't do it—I didn't do it, after all! It was a poor man, who was not wicked or cruel, but only mad! Stephen told Jane so."

"Eh—eh?" the Doctor said, bewildered.

It was not possible to explain matters there, with the flyman waiting to be paid, and two fisher boys quarrelling, nay, actually fighting, over the Doctor's portmanteau.

"It was me, sir, took it first, sir."

"No, 'twarn't," responded the other and bigger boy, with a cuff.

Sixpence a piece settled the dispute, and the Doctor, before he well knew what he was about, found himself in the arm-chair beside the fire, his little girl upon his knee, her arms close clasped about his neck, repeating again and again the same words, as though she could find no others. But when he asked for an explanation of them she fell to laughing, while the great tears filled her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheek.

"Oh, Jane will tell you all; I couldn't, dear, you know—I never could."

Then, laughing still, she for the first time became aware that he had on his hat and gloves, and unloosing her arms from about his neck, she took off first one and then the other, shaking her head and sighing pityingly over two rather big holes that she discovered in the thumbs.

"And your poor hands are quite cold," she said; "but I'll soon warm them in mine, and we shall tell you all. Please, Jane, tell papa about the poor madman, and my wicked dream."

in her simple, straightforward way, she knew; and Mildred, still nestling in his breast, laughed and sighed, and nodded, whispering eagerly, "Yes, yes, I

remember it all now, quite well. I sat down to wait, and then I fell asleep and dreamt ; and when I awoke I heard a dreadful cry, and ran away, and didn't know whether it was all a dream or the real dreadful truth ; and I sat by the fire and listened and waited. And I heard when you brought him in, and knew that he was really dead, and I thought that I had killed him, as I dreamt I had. But it was only a dream ; and I've nothing to remember or be sorry for. And again she laughed and cried for very joy, and looked into papa's face. Was he as happy as she was ? He was very pale, and was trembling and shivering all over. The sudden shock of relief was almost more than he could bear.

"Poor papa !" she murmured, softly, realizing for the first time how much he had suffered for her sake. "I never thought of this. How foolish—how selfish !" And then she fell to kissing and fondling him as if to make up by her soft caresses for all he had suffered, as indeed she so easily could.

"It was only a dream. I often had strange dreams, but never one like that. And all that has happened since will soon seem like a dream too."

She paused, and a shadow stole over her face. No, no—not all ! That long, sad, beautiful summer, with its new and wonderful emotions, that must not be a dream—it was reality—it was life from which there must be no awaking. And then, as in thought, the past and present met—while the future still lay afar off and shadowy,

but so beautiful—so beautiful, surrounded with the triple halo of faith, hope, and love—the overcharged heart gave way, and Mildred burst into tears.

The next day John Graves had a long private talk with Stephen MacCullan, when the young man told him what he already quite well knew, that he loved his daughter Mildred, and would devote his life, that part of it at least not already devoted to his profession, to making her as happy as those who loved her could wish to see her.

As he was at all times a man of but few words, and could, like many of us, speak least of what he felt most, we may be sure that he did not say a word too much—that he said enough is likewise probable, as Mildred's father was perfectly satisfied, and told him that there was not another man to whom he would as willingly give his little girl.

Stephen's request thus granted, the Doctor next proceeded to proffer one in his turn. Dr. MacCullan wanted a wife, Dr. Graves wanted a partner. The offer was in every way an advantageous one, or it would not have been made to Mildred's future husband. It was a fair opening for any man, however ambitious—work, and plenty of it, to be done—a fortune to be made—fame to be acquired. Beddington was rising in importance—social, political, and commercial—day by day.

If John Graves spoke of his beloved town with somewhat more enthusiasm than I, as an indifferent and impartial historian, feel inclined to do, it must be remembered that the place had made

him, and it was only therefore a fair return that he should make as much of it as he possibly could. For had it not been his home for the last thirty years, and was it not dearer to him than any other spot on the face of the earth?

Nobody ever yet, reader, believe me, refused a good offer, more especially when he saw no reason for so doing. Stephen MacCullan saw no reason for refusing the offer made him by Mildred's father. It was no favour he was accepting. The man before him was no longer young, and though he might work on with unabated energy for the next ten years, the place, and therefore the work, were growing beyond him, and a colleague was absolutely necessary to his comfort and peace of mind. That he was well fitted for the work, and worthy of the trust reposed in him, he knew, for his faith in himself was strong, founded upon a solid base of self-respect. Moreover he was ardent and ambitious, and a partnership with such a man as Dr. Graves, in a large populous rising country town, was the very thing to suit him. There he should have full scope for his talents, of which he was perfectly conscious, humility not being one of his cardinal virtues. He therefore, with a certain dignity not unbecoming in one sure of himself and the purity of his motives, thanked Dr. Graves for the confidence reposed in him, held out to him the right hand of fellowship, and frankly accepted his offer. He asked for three months to find a substitute, and set his affairs in order, and in the dead season of the year, when he and Woolfert

had the place almost entirely to themselves, he would bid it adieu and start for Beddington.

"And then we will speak once more about Mildred, you know," the Doctor said at parting. "She's still such a child, not fit for anything but petting and spoiling—a mere plaything, nothing more as yet, nothing more, I assure you."

Stephen could not but think that the last few months' experience had made something more of her, forming her character as long years of home petting and spoiling would not have done; but he said nothing, being quite content to leave things as they were for the present. To be where she was—see her constantly, almost daily perhaps—that was happiness enough to satisfy even him.

He went away without seeing Mildred. It was late, but he felt that he could not go home until he had had an hour's quiet reflection; until he had thought the matter over, and fully realized the great and good thing that had been granted to his life—the hope of satisfied love and satisfied ambition. No wonder that his brain felt giddy.

He walked away towards the cliffs, but suddenly stopped short. His mother would probably be gone to bed on his return. Now she was expecting him, listening for his footstep, feeling perhaps lonely and disappointed; and she had known so little of joy, so much of sorrow in her life. Should not she who had borne so much for his sake, who had shared his every trouble, be the first to hear of his good fortune? Should

he cause her disappointment where he might give her joy ; and could he not talk the matter over just as well with her as himself ? Why should he delay even one hour making her happy ?

So Stephen retraced his steps, and went home to make his mother happy by telling her of the great and good thing that had been granted to his life.

“ God bless you, dear ! ”

It was the first time that the familiar blessing had passed the mother’s lips.

CHAPTER XX.



WONDER if I shall have a chance of seeing her alone if I were to go to the cottage now? Chance, indeed! not a bit of it—and serve me right too! When I had the chance, when she was always alone, poor little thing, and I could have seen as much of her as ever I chose, I shunned her like the plague. And now that I'm half and half engaged to her I can't so much as catch her alone for five minutes."

Stephen MacCullan, though the most fortunate of men, and blest beyond anything of which he had ever dreamt, was far from being satisfied, and in anything but an amiable mood, as, having stabled his horse, he strode along the garden.

The truth was, that since Dr. Graves's arrival he had not contrived to see Mildred alone even for five minutes. That he should have been quite content to see her in company of her father and sister, nestling up very close to one or the other, is certain; but we have said that he was of a jealous, exacting nature, and so he was, even when on his best behaviour.

The day before, he had gone to the Terrace and spent there a whole hour—"a very pleasant hour," said Dr. Graves, who, looking ten years

younger than he had done a week before, and full of life and vigour, talked much and well, glad of the companionship of one for whom he already felt a real affection. That the young man might not be equally pleased with himself, that he could at that moment be harbouring the very uncivil wish to have the room to himself and his little love, was a thought that never for a moment entered the father's mind. Why, he was almost as good as engaged to her; and what more could he possibly want? Ultimately, when she was somewhat less of a child, he would be allowed to marry her; and even sooner, after a separation of three months, which was not at all worth mentioning, he was to come and live in the very same town, not two streets off. For Dr. Graves already had his eye upon a pretty cottage that would be vacant about that time. Was there ever such a lucky fellow! Beddington for his home, Mildred for his wife, and Jane, dear good serviceable little Jane, for his sister. What more could heart of man desire?

So when at the end of the hour Stephen rose to go, the Doctor shook him cordially by the hand, hoped he would step in again next evening, as he should be leaving the place in a day or two, and wished to see as much of his future partner as possible; thanked him for his visit, as if it had been made solely to himself, and even, by way of showing him special favour, accompanied him to the garden gate, telling Mildred, who seemed more than half inclined to do the same, that she had better stay where she was, as the evening

air was damp and foggy. And she answered, quite meekly, "Yes, papa," as she always did, and gave Stephen her soft little hand at parting, and a very wistful look, just as if she understood his feelings and was sorry for him.

"Not the ghost of a chance," he repeated, almost savagely, kicking away a stone that had got into his way, or rather into the way of which he had got, with a violence that hurt his toe not a little, and in no way improved his temper. Perfectly conscious all the time that it was the thought of all the opportunities he had so recklessly thrown away in his blind folly that tantalized him more than anything else, he persisted in declaring himself ill-used and neglected. "If she cared to see me alone she'd contrive it easily enough. The fact is—why, by Jove! if it isn't she herself, and alone!"

A forward spring over one of his mother's choicest flower-beds, and he was at her side, her hand in his.

"Mildred, you are an angel! and this very moment I was abusing you, right down abusing you—ungrateful fellow that I was. But what brought you here?"

"You," she answered, simply.

"I was longing for you, and you came. If my longing could but bring you always!"

"We are leaving to-morrow. Papa got a telegram, and we must return at once."

"And you came to tell me that?"

"I came to find you—I thought I should—I've been waiting here ever so long!"

"If I could but have guessed it; but I was driven to desperation; I thought I should never see you alone again."

"Yes, yes, I know," she interrupted, quickly, "and that's why I came. I couldn't go away without talking to you, and I thought you might have something to say to me."

Of course he had something to say to her—a hundred thousand things—but he couldn't put them into words just then. All he said, in a dolorous voice, was—

"And you leave already, to-morrow?"

"Yes, we must, you know; and I shall try to make papa's home bright and happy, as you said; and in three months you will come too. He told me all about it."

"Three months! and how am I to live without you during that time—how am I to manage that, do you think?"

"Hope makes every trouble so easy to bear."

"And to think that for three months I tried so hard not to love you."

Stephen was still harping upon the old grievance.

"Why did you try? did you think it wrong? did you think it wicked?"

Stephen laughed; but though it was a subject that in his rage against himself he could never quite leave alone, he did not now care to penetrate its mysteries further. They had been walking slowly on side by side; but this did not satisfy Stephen, not at all. It was but a very imperfect

view he got of her downbent face, and her eyes, as she did not once lift them, were hidden from him completely. He stopped short, therefore. The autumn day was as warm as summer, and beside them was a mossy bank where he had lounged away many an hour before the child face came to haunt him and make quiet thought impossible.

"Sit down, Mildred," he said, almost petulantly. "It's our last evening together."

"Yes, our last evening."

She sat down, and he threw himself at her feet, his elbows on the grass, his chin on his clasped hands, looking up at her.

"And so I'm to be your father's partner and live in the same town as you?"

A blush, a smile, and a very happy well satisfied little nod.

"And later, when not quite such a child, you're to be my little wife."

Blush and smile both faded slowly away.

"Does the thought frighten you, child?"

"Oh no."

"It does me sometimes."

She saw no joke in the words; she took them quite seriously, seeming to realize that it lay just as much in her power to make a man unhappy as happy—but not the man she loved.

"I will try so hard to be good and useful, and make you happy."

"That's just what frightens me; if you were but a degree less good, less soft; if you had but

a will of your own, and would not allow yourself to be tyrannized over and bullied——”

It was now her turn to laugh, and his to be quite in earnest. He half resented her taking his solemn warning thus lightly; and he continued, with a certain grim satisfaction—

“ You mustn’t think I am always the easy-going, good-natured fellow you fancy me now. I have tried you often enough, God knows, and shall again, though I love you; indeed, just because I love; I shall be jealous, exacting, cross, unbearable; and it was to tell you all this that I wished to get you alone.”

Still she laughed and shook her head, but overcome by a strange fit of shyness she did not dare look up at him.

“ I’m not afraid—not a bit.”

“ And then my profession—it’s such a nasty cruel one, as you saw with Mrs. Puffit’s baby; and you hate cruelty.”

“ Yes, I hate it,” she said, knitting the smooth childish brow. “ I have known people who were cruel, and I hated them. They are mean, unjust, cowardly—they strike the poor horse when it’s tired, and the dog who loves and trusts them when they’re out of temper—and they’re not sorry when the poor little hare they have shot rolls in agony at their feet, though it cries like a child. It’s so dreadful to be cruel just because you’re strong and the creatures you torture weak.”

Stephen lifted his brows and stroked his chin reflectively.

"So you find it less excusable to torture dumb creatures than fellow mortals—the hare that cries like a child than the child itself? Will you never shrink from me and the touch of my hand when you see it stained with the blood of a patient?"

He laid his right hand upon hers as he spoke, almost roughly. He was evidently not quite sure of her yet, after all her love and devotion.

She shivered and turned pale; but she did not shrink from him; on the contrary, with a sudden movement she bent down, and without consciousness of shame laid her soft tremulous lips upon the hand so strong to save, so gentle to soothe. "You are good," she whispered, eagerly; "you never inflict pain because you are strong, but because you are good. Oh! how good you are!"

The contact of those lips felt for the first time, of the woman's breath upon his hand, of her loosened hair as it brushed it, thrilled the man's strong frame, and a strange quiver ran through him. He frowned, and drew his hand hastily away as if her kiss had burnt it. "Don't make me ashamed of myself and of your love, Mildred," he said, almost bitterly. "I have been unjust and cruel to you; I know it, and you know it too."

"Cruel to *me*! Oh no. You saved my life twice, dragging me from under the engine, and again, though you were so angry with me because I dared not tell you the truth, you came out over the waters to fetch me, risking your own noble, useful life to save mine. And you watched

by me when I was ill, day and night, just as if I had been your sister or——” She paused, the last words faltering and broken, then added, with a certain awed solemnity, “your wife. And you taught me to love the poor, and helped me to do right; and I have only my love to give you in return for all.”

She spoke very softly, with wet lashes and quivering lip. Stephen scarcely knew whether to feel most flattered or ashamed.

If she persisted in making of him a sort of hero, what remained for him but to submit? Her good opinion would not make him think a whit the better of himself, or the worse either; and later, perhaps, she'd find out for herself of what poor stuff heroes are made. This was a very pleasant, reassuring thought, no doubt; and quite satisfied with it, he changed the conversation.

He had been gradually coming nearer and nearer; he was very near now—his elbow on her dress, his head almost touching her shoulder.

“Whatever am I to do with myself when you are gone? Three months! It seems an eternity—an eternity of suspense.”

“Of hope,” smiled Mildred. “I always think that hope is another name for eternity—without beginning and without end: always looking forward—on and on. You will miss me sometimes, but then you will look forward, and be quite, quite happy.”

“And you—will you be quite happy without me?”

"Oh yes; so happy!"

This was said with an eager readiness that both vexed and amused Stephen.

"Happy without me?"

"I shall never again be without you. You will be in all that I do, in all that I think. Nothing will seem hard or difficult. Papa says that I am still too much of a child for you to think of marrying me; but three months is a long, long time; and if I try very hard, I shall be quite womanly when you come at Christmas, so that you can marry me without any fear of my not making you happy."

"And how do you mean to accomplish that, the making me happy, I mean, when you're my little wife?"

She was looking down, playing absently with the big brown hand that, having been laid on her dress, had been drawn gently up to her lap, turning about it the little soft fingers. She seemed to find some difficulty in answering his question, for a silence fell between them.

"How do you mean to prove your love, and make me happy?"

A further pause; then she looked up suddenly, a warm, eager light in her eyes.

"When we are always together, it will seem so easy. I shall soon learn to know what you like and expect."

"But we shan't be always together; on the contrary, I shall be always away from home," persisted Stephen, bent upon being contradictory, or perhaps getting her to speak. "A quiet chat

like this will be quite a rare treat. Three parts of the day I shall be administering pills and powders, and you——”

“I shall stay quietly at home, and wait for your return. If the time seems very long, and I get too tired of waiting, then, I shall call Woolfert and talk to him about you, and tell him all my thoughts, and I shall feel quite gay and happy again. When I hear your horse’s hoofs along the road I shall run out to meet you—always, even when it rains, and in the cold winter weather. And when your poor hands are quite numb and stiff with holding the reins, I’ll take them into both mine, and rub them till they get warm. In the evening, if you like it, I’ll sing to you, as I always do to papa; or if you’re tired and worried I’ll sit beside you without talking or even moving, if it disturbs you. When you are ill I’ll nurse you, so carefully that you must get well again. I don’t quite know how, for I never did nurse any one; but—but when you want me I shall know, and I’ll mend your gloves, and see to your shirt buttons. I didn’t think of this myself, of the shirt buttons I mean, you know,” she added, as if afraid of arrogating to herself more than was her due. “It was Jane who told me that all husbands expect that of their wives, and I’m learning to sew them on so neatly—I sewed two on for papa to-day.”

“And is that all you’ll do to make me happy?” asked Stephen, in a tone of chagrin, though feeling all the time that he would not ex-

change one soft foolish word for the passionate love of a Cleopatra.

"Oh no," she answered him, quite gravely, and with a very earnest look, "I'll try to be good, and do all you tell me; and I'll help you whenever you want me; and visit your poor patients, and—and do all you tell me," she repeated, as if in obedience to his commands lay the secret of conjugal perfection.

"I wish you were already my little wife; the picture you have drawn is so beautiful and pleasant a one."

"So beautiful and pleasant," she echoed, softly.

"And therefore all the harder to wait for," he continued, moodily, half inclined to be angry with her for being so calm and contented. "If you mean to make me so awfully happy by-and-by why not begin by giving me a test of the happiness now?"

"Oh, if I could!" with a quick, upward glance, shy and rapturous.

He sprang to his feet. "Kiss me, Mildred."

There was another shy, uplifting of the shadowy eyes. She had risen too, startled a little by his impetuosity. "I can't; you're so tall, and I'm so little."

"Kiss me," he repeated. But now he was kneeling before her, and quite within the range of both eyes and lips.

Her hands dropped flutteringly upon his broad shoulders, then clasped themselves round his neck.

He drew her to him—his arms about her waist.

“You once said that there was nothing you would not do to make me happy.”

“I wish I could think that my kisses would always have power to make you happy.”

It was the woman who now spoke, not the child.

“One kiss, Mildred ; only one.”

“You are so good ; you never stole a kiss from me, never, though all I have is yours, because I love you.” Then she bent her face down towards his, until the bright waves of her hair touched his forehead.

Is Stephen to be blamed, reader, if, instead of the one kiss he had asked for, he pressed another and another, long and lingering, upon the sweet lips that had but just now breathed such tender, loving words? When at last he let her go, and staggered to his feet, all thrilled and trembling, for, a man of strong passions, he loved her with the strength and fervour of his strong nature, she drew a deep breath, so deep as to be a sigh.

“Did I frighten you?” he asked, moved to something very like pity, so soft and frail a creature she looked ! standing before him quite pale and still, that deep sigh quivering upon the lips that he had kissed.

“No, you didn’t frighten me. I was just thinking how good God is to have made us love each other so much.”

CHAPTER XXI.



ES, that's the right way to look upon it, I'm sure. When one has so much to be grateful for, why fret about what can't be helped? It was none of my fault, nor——" Jane coloured almost with shame, not for herself, but the man for whom the kind little heart was so ready to find excuses. "Not my fault, nor his," she was about to say, but that was not quite true, and so she dared not say it, even to herself; yet, anxious still to excuse him, she altered, without dropping the train of thought, "The happiness of one is the trial of another. It's always so in life—always. How happy she must be now, the poor little cousin, who loved him in silence for so many years, whereas I only knew him for as many months, perhaps! Yes, they were only months; but time is nothing where you love—or wish to forget. Not a year since we parted, and he has forgotten me—is engaged—perhaps married to another! If I could but have known this before, or if he would but have waited just a little longer. But God did not mean that he should; the little cousin was to be made happy, and I—and I—— Well, it's no use fretting about what can't be helped; and yet he might

have waited, certainly. If he had loved me he would have waited—no matter how long. I have known those who did for years and years; and when all came right at last, how happy they were. But then they really loved! Perhaps he thought he cared for me; he did not think the poor little cousin was breaking her heart for love of him—or perhaps he did, and then, when we were together, and I was so proud of his preference, her image came between us, and the thought of her and her love made the parting with me less difficult. And now she's to be his wife! But where's the use of fretting about what can't be helped?"

Jane knew that she would have to say this over and over again to still the rebellious murmurings that would at times arise. So long as Mildred's sad secret weighed upon her heart, she had found her lover's desertion much less hard to bear. How could she wish his whole life to be sacrificed to her, poor fellow? If she were not to be allowed to make him happy, was he never to be made happy by any one else? But now that the whole mystery had been cleared up; that she was as free as she had ever been to love, and be loved—nay, more so, for Mildred had found a new protector, and was growing quite a little woman—the whole thing did seem hard and cruel, and unjust, and the poor child had to repeat the above stoical maxim pretty often to prevent herself growing moody and embittered.

She was feeling both the one and the other

as she sat in the railway carriage staring blankly out of the window with anything but a pleasant look upon her usually bright face. They were on their way home, and this return it was, and the contrast between what would be and what might have been, that turned every thought to gall and wormwood. It is strange how often those who bear up most bravely against a succession of adverse circumstances—rising the higher and stronger the greater the burden laid upon them, keeping a stout heart and a clear brow so long as their strength and faith are needed to help those who may be weaker than they—break down when part of the load is lifted from their lives, and those around them smile once more and are happy. Then self, which so long has slept, awakes with the heart-weary cry, "They don't want me; they are happy, so I can give way at last."

Jane said this and much more, staring blankly out upon the bright autumn landscape, every mile of which as they passed it by was bringing her nearer and nearer home.

"They don't want me; they are happy, and of my trouble they know nothing, and never shall. Why should I tell them, when they are so happy?"

Yes, papa and Mildred were very happy, sitting close together at the further end, the latter chattering away excitedly, half mad with delight at the thought of going home. How she could find so much to say about a garden and two rather shabby old watch dogs, about a plump,

slow-trotting pony, older still, and a hundred other objects that any one less foolishly fond than she would not have deemed worth a thought, would have puzzled any listener but that grey-haired man, who was quite as happy and almost as excited as she.

"They don't want me!" Quite right, poor little Jane, that's the way of the world; it was so before your time, and will be after it. The sacrifice of a whole life's happiness seems so easy when love and duty tell you that it must be made; but when days, or months, or maybe years afterwards, the self-pitying heart says that it was made in vain——Well, that reflection must be borne too, like the rest, and if faith chance to whisper that no sacrifice can be in vain, that some day we shall see of the travail of our soul and be satisfied, we turn our slow dull gaze from the past where lies the irremediable to the future, where faith and mercy give to all the same—a hope.

At the last station but one before reaching Beddington, there was a ten minutes' halt. Mildred was giving full employment to both eyes and tongue, and more than once turned eagerly to sister Jane, claiming her attention and sympathy. But for the first time in her life, perhaps, Jane was deaf to the soft plaintive voice, plaintive still, though the child herself was so happy.

"They don't want me," she repeated, with a certain dogged pleasure in tormenting herself; for she was, as we have seen, in a most unfortunate frame of mind.

Suddenly, a well-known voice, coming as if in answer to her thoughts, made her start and turn round, whilst her heart beat wildly. Yes, her ear had not deceived her. There, on the platform, not many paces off, stood Charles Eden; and hanging on his arm, nestling close up to him with confiding tenderness, was a young woman, pale, fair, delicate, and slightly deformed, but with a face that beaming, sparkling, rippling all over with happy content, was a very pleasant one to look at. A pair of large soft eyes, that would have redeemed any face from the charge of plainness, were uplifted to his, and the Curate's grave, quiet gaze rested on her with a certain fond complacency. One of the little lady's hands was ungloved, and on it shone the wedding ring, its first brightness not yet worn off. She was proud of it, no doubt, and took precious good care to show it!

They were talking to an elderly gentleman who was evidently chaffing the bride, for she blushed, and laughed very shyly, and looking down began playing nervously with the strings of her bonnet, Charles Eden smiling down at her well pleased.

But the ten minutes were over, the young couple hurried to their compartment, and Jane caught distinctly the friend's parting salutation as he stood, bowing, nodding, and laughing on the platform.

"Good-bye, Charles, my boy. Good-bye, Mrs. Eden. I'll get rid of that stupid old companion of mine, the gout, and take to a pretty

little wife instead. Nothing like matrimony for giving bright looks and rosy cheeks—eh, Charlie? Ha, ha!”

And away puffed the train, and Jane clenched her hands, and spent the next half hour in the most frantic attempts to keep back the rising tears, biting her lips, and winking her eyes, and coughing, and choking, and trying hard, oh, so hard, to feel perfectly indifferent to the Curate, his desertion, his wife; to everything, in short, that belonged to him.

But the more she struggled the more she suffered, and at last the tears, getting the better of her heroic efforts, coursed down her cheeks, and though she would have given anything to keep them back, dreading of all things in the world a scene, and the having to disturb the happiness of others, she could not but own that a few quiet, silent drops, wrung from her in the bitterness of her soul, would do harm to no one, while they were such a relief to her; so, averting her face, and hiding it as best she might with her trembling hand, she let them flow, just because she could not help it.

The more still Jane grew in her corner the more excited grew Mildred, until at last, when Beddington was reached, and called up and down the platform, she jumped up all flushed and panting, and, clasping both arms about the Doctor's arm, looked him almost wildly in the face.

“Oh, papa! is it true—is it really, really true? Shall I see the dear old home where I

was so happy, where I shall be so much happier than I ever was before, because of—Stephen, papa, dear, you know—and all the good and beautiful thoughts he gave me to take back with me there? Isn't it all a dream?—it seems so like one."

John Graves could not answer; for to him, too, after the dread experiences of the past year, it seemed happiness too great to be realized.

"Are you not happy, Jane? Isn't it all very wonderful? Could you have believed when we were in such trouble that it would all end so?"

"End so, indeed!" echoed the girl's heart, drearily; but she answered none of the eager questions, being just then very busy collecting together the loose packages.

The sisters were left standing alone on the platform whilst the Doctor went to see after the luggage and the carriage that was to be in waiting for them. Jane, her veil drawn down, and her eyes fixed on the ground, that none might notice how heavy and red and swollen they were, did not see that the grave, quiet glance of one of the passengers, wandering slowly along the platform, lighted suddenly upon her; when the gentleman, with an exclamation, sprung from the train, and hurried to her side.

"Miss Graves!"

Again the familiar voice, again the familiar form, and again, too, the convulsive start and burning blush, as she faced sharply round.

"You here?" she said, jerking out the first

words that rose to her lips. She had quite overlooked the chance of a meeting at the Beddington station. What had he now to do with her home, or anything else that was hers? She had said to herself that she would never see him again—she had devoutly hoped that she never would. The first flush of excitement having died slowly out, it was a very pale face that she raised to his, nothing of colour about it but those poor red, swollen lids, telling so plainly of recent tears. And looking at it the man's face paled too. For awhile they stood gazing at each other in perfect silence, and feeling cold and hard and dead as the stone pavement to which her eyes soon dropped once more, Jane cared but little whether she ever heard his voice again. But she did hear it—low, tremulous, embarrassed—asking a simple question—

“ You are going home ? ”

“ Yes.”

Another indifferent remark. “ The Doctor is with you ? ”

Just then Dr. Graves appeared to answer for himself. One look into the man's face told Charles Eden the truth ; that the sorrow, whatever that might have been, that had darkened his life and that of his children, had passed away. As the conviction flashed through his mind his cheek flushed crimson, then grew paler even than it had been before.

The Doctor shook him cordially by the hand, evidently well pleased to see him again. A question or two were put and answered, then

Jane's father broke off abruptly, and added, with a good-natured smile—

"You must allow me to congratulate you. I have already heard the grand news, and am glad of this opportunity of offering you my congratulations."

"Thank you," the Curate answered, in a low and rather unsteady voice.

As he spoke, Jane's eyes rose involuntarily from the ground, and were turned to where, from a certain window, a fair young face smiled out upon them with happy, trusting eyes.

"The train's moving off, papa," she said, with more than her usual brusqueness of tone and manner, "and we're keeping Mr. Eden talking when he should already be seated. Pray don't let us detain you."

The train was not moving, but it was, as she had said, time to be seated. Charles Eden shook hands with the Doctor and Mildred, but Jane, eyes and cheek all aflame, was busy loading herself with baskets and bags, and had no hand to spare. "Good-bye," she said, tossing him a parting look over her shoulder.

CHAPTER XXII.



WHICH of us, returning to the place most familiar after an absence of, let us say only months, returning with changed feelings and interests, is not surprised to find all just as we left it, to find things going on just as they went on before the change came in our lives, making us view everything so differently? There is a story told of a Winchester boy who, his school days over, returned at the end of a week to see a friend, and looking around exclaimed, sententiously, "Nothing changed; all just as I left it!" Now I understand the youth's feeling perfectly. His life, his interests having altered so completely within that one week, the very familiarity of the old place struck him with a sense of strangeness.

The old grey house, slumbering amid the evening shadows, solemn and still as when, a mere gaunt skeleton, doorless and windowless, the curious urchins of Beddington had clambered over the heaps of stones and rubbish to look, not without a certain awe, at the "new house." Since then generations had been born and died there, born and lived and suffered and died—convulsions of feeling and passion, such as have before now overthrown whole nations, had been going

on within its walls, intellects had been overthrown, lives sacrificed, hearts broken; but still the old house, strong and unshaken, not a stone loosened, stood as at the first, casting its monster shadow over the gay modern flower beds, those same beds upon which John Graves's young wife had smiled, recognising in them so many friends and companions of her lonely girlhood. The same flower beds; and bending over them the same old white-haired gardener who had been so fond of the mother, who was so fond of the child who had her eyes and voice and smile. House and garden and the familiar objects about them all unchanged, unchanged too the little figure standing beneath the chestnut tree, apparently at least; yet Mildred, looking round, wonders how everything can have remained just the same, when she herself is no longer so. "You have never seen him, Stephen MacCullan; how odd!" she whispers to the old bleary-eyed watch dog, as she kneels down to feed him, just as she did through all those years that now seem to lie so far, far away.

Even quiet matter-of-fact little Jane, because she viewed all in life very differently to what she had done before, was surprised to find how little changed was everything and everybody.

"Well, at least poor Mrs. Reeves will be sadly altered," she said to herself with a sigh, as she paused a moment at the Roslynn drawing-room door, hesitating before she opened it.

Courage Jane, a year has passed, or the better part of a year at least, since the blow fell, and

the woman cried aloud in her despair that she could not outlive it, that she should never hold up her head again.

Mrs. Reeves had worn mourning six months, and was in black silk still ; but she was no longer broken-hearted or despairing, very far from it. She had managed to get over the loss of a very good husband of whom she was really fond, and in like manner she had got over the loss of the model nephew whose death had not after all left so great a void in her life. Indeed, after the first shock, and a very great shock it had been, she was herself surprised to find how little she missed him, how little she had lost in him. It was horrible of course—most horrible ! She still shuddered whenever she recalled that awful winter night and the tale of terror that had been brought to her. And therefore the thought of him and his untimely fate being a most unpleasant one, she was only too glad to dismiss it from her mind ; so his name soon ceased to be mentioned in the home that was to have been his. A loss to make any deep, lasting impression must be irreparable, and Mrs. Reeves had quite made up for the loss of one nephew by the adoption of another.

Not a model nephew, this one—oh dear no ! which was quite as well, perhaps. It is possible to have too much even of a good thing, and two model nephews ! There is a sort of oppression in the very thought.

Jack Reeves was a sailor—had run off to sea when a lad, “because his name was Jack,” he

would say, with a laugh ; but his relatives, with many a sigh and shake of the head, had told a very different tale. Unlike his model cousin, he had got a hundred times into scrapes—into debt—in love. But he was a good fellow—a very good fellow—for all that.

It was not much he troubled his rich relations, for his voyages often extended over many years ; but when he did appear at his uncle's, it was with a sudden electric shock that upset the whole household, and turned the house itself topsy-turvy in no time. Was there ever such a fellow for laughing, talking, chaffing, making more noise in one hour than did the respected cousin in the course of a lifetime ? But there was another thing he made besides a noise—viz., love to all the servant maids, the young and pretty ones at least (for Jack was fastidious as regarded female looks), and many were the secret tears shed in the lower regions when the merry, bewhiskered, sea-burnt face disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared ; for, having turned the house topsy-turvy, sailor Jack would make himself scarce, having first coaxed uncle or aunt out of a few bank-notes, which he went off to spend, heaven only knows where and how.

All this being quite contrary to the respectable old merchant's principles, he very decidedly set his face against the nephew who could never be a credit to the name he bore, or to the family to which he belonged.

But with his aunt he had always been a prime favourite, just, perhaps, because he was such a

contrast to the other cousin, so reckless, good-natured, easy, and impetuous. It needed but the big brown awkward fingers laid confidently on the white jewelled hand, and the half-coaxing, half-defiant, "Well, I'll tell you just how it is, auntie," to get out of her whatever he wanted. Many a bank-note from her own private hoard had she sent him across the sea, many a sigh had she sent out after him too, when she heard the storm beat loud and wild at her window.

That he might have been adopted, and made the heir to Roslynn instead of the model nephew of whom both uncle and aunt were so proud, was a thing which never for a moment suggested itself to her mind, nor to his either, not even when, three months after Derwent's death, he landed at Liverpool, and immediately took train for Beddington, anxious to see the old lady, and comfort her as best he might.

"She'll be glad to see me, I daresay, and not a farthing will I take from her, not even if she offers it me," he said, thrusting his hands deep down into his trousers pockets, and putting on a look of fierce determination. "It's not to beg I'm going there this time, but just to see if I can't cheer her up a bit, poor old body! She must be terribly cut up, for he was a fine fellow, by George he was! There aren't many like him, and she's no one now to be proud of," he added, with a slight sigh and clouding over of the bright open face. "But I'll see if I can't cheer her up a bit."

And cheer her up he did in a wonderfully

short space of time, and by the most extraordinary means. By soft gentle pappings of her hand, encouraging slaps on the back, hearty sympathy in her regrets, hearty praises of the dead; nay, by his very presence, so full of life and health and vigour.

Not an hour in the day but he cursed himself for an awkward blundering fool, yet it was really wonderful how instinctively he accommodated himself to her tastes and whims. When standing whistling at his bedroom window he saw her pottering about the grounds, her solitary figure in its deep mourning would give him a pang at his heart, and he would be out and at her side in a moment.

It was no great act of devotion certainly to offer his arm when he noticed that her steps flagged, to listen to and answer her when she spoke, to abstain from smoking in the drawing-room when every other room was just as comfortable and far more suited to the purpose, to tolerate her guests, just because they were her guests, no matter of what age or condition; nay, more, to be civil and cordial to all alike, winning thereby golden opinions at every turn. No act of heroic devotion certainly; but aunt Reeves, unaccustomed to such natural attentions, was both touched by and grateful for them.

He had been with her a month when one morning she called him into her room, and with a look of weighty importance shook out her rustling skirts, then seated herself in state, waving him to an opposite seat, and informed him after

a long and solemn preface, to which he listened with all his ears, but of which he could make neither head nor tail, that she had finally resolved upon adopting him and making him her heir.

Something in the offer, or the words or tone in which it was made, caused the sailor nephew to start and colour violently, the red blood plainly visible through tan and freckles, and pulling recklessly at the big whiskers as if it were against them only he had a grudge, he said almost gruffly—

“Much obliged to you, aunt. Very kind of you, I’m sure; but I never thought of such a thing, never, by George! and I don’t somehow think it would do.”

“Why not?” Mrs. Reeves asked, disappointed at the cool, indifferent manner in which her handsome offer had been taken, and feeling that the greatest favour he could possibly do her would be to accept it, and remain at Roslynn.

“Why not?”

He rose impetuously, and plumping his chair down close at her side with a force that made her literally jump, he spread his hand out over hers and began in a confidential tone—

“I’ll just tell you what it is, auntie. You see, I never thought of such a thing, never; and as to wills and all that sort of thing I think it’s ten times better to leave them to the last; time enough to think about that when the lawyer has to open and read them. I never saw any good come of people trying the fit of another’s shoes when he hasn’t done wearing them himself.”

"But life's at all times uncertain," broke in Mrs. Reeves, sententiously.

The soft patting of the hand was exchanged for the encouraging slap on the back.

"Never fear, auntie. You're good for twenty years at least. There's aunt Bridget eighty-two last birthday, and as active and merry as a cricket. I don't see why you shouldn't make old bones just as well as she, and I hope from my heart you will!"

She felt sure, quite sure of that—sure that he meant exactly what he said, neither more nor less. He was incapable of a lie. Of course she was more resolved than ever to make him her heir and the master of Roslynn, but she dropped the subject of the will for the time being.

"If you would remain with me and make Roslynn your home—if you would take poor Derwent's place, I'm sure your uncle would have wished it."

Sailor Jack felt by no means so sure of this.

"It would of course be a great sacrifice for you to leave the sea, and settle down here, in a dull country place."

"Oh, as to that," broke in honest Jack, bluntly, "I'm just as sick of a sea-life as I can be. I've sown my wild oats, and I've often wished I could cut the whole concern and begin life ashore. I'm fond of the country, too. I like horses and dogs and poultry, and all that sort of thing, having been brought up among them on the farm at home. And if I could be of any use to you looking after things a bit, and you could give me

work to do, why, I'd as lief stay here as go anywhere else."

So it had been settled; and Mrs. Reeves having repaired the loss of one nephew by the adoption of another, Jane was surprised to find how very placid and cheerful she was, and how completely the vacant place had been filled up in the aunt's life and heart.

She was of course delighted to have the girls back again; and, sure that Jane must be just as eager to hear the Beddington news as she was to impart it, she gave her all the gossip of the place, winding up with what she considered the tit-bit.

"You know, I suppose, that poor dear Mr. Chatterman is very ill, not expected to live from one week to the other; and his curate, a slow, sleepy individual, has had the parish entirely in his hands for the last three months. I washed my hands of the whole concern. Since Mr. Eden left everything has sunk back into the old groove; but I hope to get the living for him. My uncle, the bishop, has a personal interest in the family, and would be glad to oblige any member of it, so I hope that between us we shall manage to get him here. What a blessing for the parish! such a zealous minister, so efficient, so liberal minded! It would be a real privilege to work under him."

Jane flushed and paled, and swelled and choked, but she said nothing. No, she said nothing, though she thought the more.

"Coming here—to my home! Here, where I can't escape him, do what I will—where I

shall see him daily, hourly—where I must work with him hand in hand, or not work at all. And I had hoped to forget him and his cruel, cruel conduct.”

“ His position will be a very different one to what it was when he was here last. A curate with a salary of eighty pounds a year is hardly the same creature as a rector with six hundred. If he were but free he’d have all the young ladies at his feet now.”

“ Young ladies always run after clergymen,” put in Jane, snappishly, and with a short unpleasant laugh. She was certainly far less amiable than she had always been, was Jane—sharp and bitter and uncharitable. So is a noble character too often spoilt by the wrong-doing of another. Confidence misplaced, the heart hardened and embittered. The loving, impulsive girl, the sour, gossiping, slanderous old maid. The whole earth laid under a curse for the sin of the one. It was so from the beginning ; it will be so to the end.

Mrs. Reeves laughed. “ I think poor Mr. Eden escaped pursuit pretty well ; but it’s fortunate for him that he’s no longer to be caught, for a young rector with six hundred a year and a charming rectory is a prize worth any amount of running after.”

Jane bade Mrs. Reeves a quiet good-bye ; then, telling herself that she should be late home, and must make haste to get there, started off at a furious pace. But by-and-bye realizing that there’s no such thing as hurrying beyond one’s

fate, she slackened speed and walked on quietly, pondering as she went.

How easy it is, or seems to be, to deceive others, how impossible to deceive yourself. Jane said that it was the quick walking that made her heart beat and her limbs tremble, and the temples of her head throb almost to bursting; and all the time she knew perfectly well that it was the thought of Charles Eden, and the wrong that had been done her. "Wicked—cruel—unjust! And he was coming there—to her very home where she could not escape him." For the moment she felt more angry even than sad. He should have refused the living, renounced it for her sake. But perhaps he had heard that she would never return to Beddington—it would almost seem so by the abruptness of his first question—whether they were going home.

Plain facts are soon thought over and disposed of, but once begin with conjectures, and there's no making an end of them. Like ill-weeds they overrun the truth, until at last it's lost sight of altogether.

Jane's soliloquy had in it so many *ifs* and *perhapes* that not one-half of them could be comfortably disposed of before reaching home.

Mildred was leaning over the garden gate, and ran out to meet her, all flushed and eager.

"I've done it, Jane—I myself—quite alone, without help."

"Done what?"

"The pie—the beefsteak pie for to-morrow—all myself, the paste and eggs, the boiling and

cutting up of them, I mean, and pepper—and—and—but her culinary knowledge had come to an end. "I can't quite remember without Sarah or the cookery book, but it says—she says—Sarah, I mean, that it will be first-rate. Stephen likes beefsteak pie. He always took it, except that once when he was angry with me, wouldn't eat anything, and I felt so unhappy. I didn't at all mind making the paste, it was such fun rolling it, and making a pattern round the edge with a fork; but I burnt my hand opening the oven to look if it was getting brown. But Sarah says that isn't necessary, that it won't get any the browner for my always looking at it. I daresay she's quite right, and I won't be so foolish another time, but it seems so odd that I should make a whole beefsteak pie all by myself, and I've still so much to learn before he comes. Three months all but three days!" After the last words came a little sigh, whether of regret for the length or shortness of the time it would be impossible for us to say, for Mildred herself too perhaps.

Three months all but three days' separation for the one sister, a life-long separation for the other!

"You didn't see the postman, dear?"

"No."

Not for the life of her could Jane have got out another word, the one almost choked her. Passing hastily on, she went straight up to her room and locked herself in. "Jane, do you know that you're growing morose and spiteful—

yes, positively spiteful? You almost grudge others the happiness that is never to be yours ;” you who were so noble-hearted, so self-sacrificing, so unselfish.

The last clause of the sentence only has been added by the author, all the rest poor little Jane said to herself, and she drew her smooth brow into a frown, and put on a severe self-condemnatory look.

What victory is won without a struggle? and what victory so great and hardly won as the victory over our own rebellious heart? Jane had triumphed over circumstances, but she had yet to triumph over self; and night and morning she prayed in child-like simplicity of soul that the struggle might be made easier to her, that God would help her to keep her sorrow all to herself, for she was mightily afraid of its shadow being somehow cast upon the lives of others.

“How good she is, how gentle, how fond, how worthy of his love!” It was thus Jane Graves always contrived to exchange a bitter thought for a tender one.

Resolved to turn her thoughts from her own selfish sorrow, she forced herself to go to the window, and reached it just in time to see the postman hand a letter over the gate—a letter from Stephen! She knew it by the soft eager way in which the little hands went out to meet it, both hands at once, as if the one could be jealous of the other. Then, softly as it had been taken, so softly was it pressed to the girl’s lips and bosom, and as with lingering fingers and

eyes fixed devouringly upon the dear but still unfamiliar hand, she broke the seal. Jane turned away, and a great loneliness stole over her, such as she had never felt before, and with it arose once more the yearning cry at her heart, "They don't want me, they're happy; henceforth my love and care will be nothing to them—my life, too, nothing to them, or him, or myself." And the passionate longing for some love, some interest all her own, for some one to care for, and think for, and suffer for, and live for—a love not subject to change, as must be every other but the one—but to cling to, to rest in, your hope, your life, your *home*.

Again her eyes turn wistfully to the garden, seeking the little sister, the very sight of whom has so often power to comfort her, and they fall, not on her, but on the figure of Charles Eden walking slowly and quietly along the gravel path leading to the house. "He had come to tell her all! She would hear all. She would see him, speak with him; all should be straight and clear between them. She would feel much better, quieter, happier, after that." And as each fresh thought welled up from the overburdened heart, the colour mounted to her cheek, higher and higher, till her face was all aglow. Jane excited, panting, throbbing, flushing! It was not thus she had loved Charles Eden when she had taken such a motherly interest in his affairs, such a sisterly interest in himself. Why can we only fully realize the value of that which is lost to us?

Jane hearing the street door close, rose mechanically, and with a certain eager abruptness, as if anxious to get the thing over, walked across the room, down the stairs, into the drawing-room, and straight up to Charles Eden, who stood on the hearthrug awaiting her.

Her hand was taken, held one moment, then dropped. It was certainly not a lover's clasp, but as certainly that of a friend, quiet and close. There was an awkward silence, and she was just schooling the reluctant lips to tell him that she was glad he had come, that all might be clear and open between them before they met again, as minister and parishioner, and nothing more, when the Doctor entered, splashed from head to foot, but looking wonderfully bright and cheery. Mildred was, of course, at his side, having fallen into the old ways on her return to the old home.

"I heard you were here, and came at once to welcome you; but you spend the evening with us, so I can be spared five minutes to make myself presentable, eh? A long ride at this time of the year is no joke. Order in tea, Jane."

The Doctor left the room, cheerily as he had entered it, followed closely by Mildred, who still believed, though such a much wiser little woman in many respects, that the surest way of making papa happy was to hang about him, and follow him from room to room, just as she had done when such a foolish child, learning all life's great lessons from the birds and flowers.

As the door closed, Jane faced round upon

her companion. She would be the first to speak ; not a word should he utter till she had had her say.

" Papa congratulated you the other day when we met you at the station. I should have done so too. I didn't then, but I do so now. I'm glad that you are so happy."

" Thank you ; but have I not also to congratulate you ?"

" Upon what ?" she asked sharply, so sharply that he hesitated before speaking again.

" I beg your pardon, but we were once friends, and as a friend I wished to speak to you. You were in trouble when we parted. You are no longer so now, at least I hope not."

He waited for an answer : none came.

" Has the trouble that threatened your life passed from it ?"

" Yes."

" And you forgot your promise ?"

She forget indeed ! How dared he speak so to her ; he who had forgotten her so soon and so completely ?

" No one ever forgets what he cares to remember," was the bitter retort, spoken with heaving breast and quivering lip.

" Then why did you not write to me as you promised ?"

Poor Jane ! She did not find it half as easy a thing to speak out her mind as she had expected. She was mortally afraid that if she did speak she would make a fool of herself—burst out crying perhaps, like a baby or a silly schoolgirl.

"Why did you not write to me as you promised?"

He could speak calmly; he could repeat the cruel question without a tremor in his voice, a change in his countenance. How completely he at least had forgotten!

And looking up into his grave, calm face, she grew reckless.

"I made the promise because I thought you cared for me, because you said you did. I don't mean to say anything unkind—" as she saw how pained he looked. "I don't mean to blame you—but—but, as all is over between us, I don't see what right you have to judge my actions, or call me to account for them."

"All over between us," he repeated.

He was evidently thinking of friendship, she of love. How cold and valueless seemed the one beside the other!

"I don't want to speak about myself," she went on, with a certain ring of passion in her voice, but feeling at the same time all anger die out of her heart for the man whose plain, homely face, so good, so earnest, so pitying, was bent upon her. "Thank you for thinking of our trouble, it's over now—quite over, thank God! It was never a real trouble or worth making such a fuss about"—with a sudden pang and sigh of regret; "but it's past and done with, and papa and Mildred are quite happy. But I don't want to speak of that now. Wont you tell me something about yourself and"—there

was a pause, and rather a long one, but the next words came out softly—"your wife?"

A sudden light breaking in upon the Curate's mind, broke at the same time over his face—broke over, then died out of it, leaving it graver even than before, as he said—

"I have no wife. I see that you have fallen into the same mistake as the rest. I never thought of this. I could never have believed it possible."

In the few simple straightforward words, in the man's simple straightforward look, Jane saw her mistake—saw that, spite of appearances, nay, even proofs, he had been true to her, was true to her still—that her sighs, her tears, her repinings, had been so much waste of feeling and time.

"They told me that you were engaged," she stammered, feeling thoroughly ashamed, guilty, crushed. "They showed me your own letter in which you said it. And I saw your wife. I mean the lady I thought your wife, hanging on your arm—they called her Mrs. Eden, and I saw the wedding ring."

"The lady was my cousin Lucy, of whom I once spoke to you, I think. She married her cousin and mine, Charles Eden, of Rowllins."

"I couldn't tell, I saw her on your arm."

"I was accompanying her home from her parents' house; her husband had to leave a day sooner."

"And you're not married after all or engaged—or—or——"

“Likely to be. No; as you say that all is over between us, not at all likely, Jane.”

Still so gravely spoken; with nothing of a lover's eager fervour. If he had kept true to her and loved her still, why were his look and voice so cold? Longing as she was for some token of affection, she felt quite chilled and frightened.

“How could I help believing it?” she said, in a half aggrieved, half deprecating tone. “If you had heard of my engagement, had it stated as a positive fact, seen it acknowledged in my own handwriting——”

“I should have waited to have the fact confirmed by your own lips before I believed you faithless, and gave you up.”

“But if you had seen my wife—I mean my husband, hanging on my arm—that is——”

Jane saw that she was talking dreadful nonsense, and burst out laughing, though the tears stood in her eyes.

“I'm very sorry I ever doubted you,” she said, simply; “and I'm sure I never should if I could have helped it—it made me so unhappy, and it could never have been had I cared for you less.”

“Or trusted me more.”

“I could never doubt you again,” she said, speaking more softly, with more maiden timidity than she had ever done before even to her lover, for she felt not a little awed at the almost magisterial gravity of his face, which no word of hers had as yet had power to soften into any-

thing at all pleasant or lover-like. "What is past is past; there's not another cousin Charles or cousin Lucy to come between us, and I shouldn't care a bit if there were. They could never again make me doubt you," she added, hot and indignant, though against whom she could not herself have said, so we certainly cannot.

"I thought nothing could ever make you doubt me," answered her Charles Eden, with a pained smile.

"You said when we parted that each was henceforth perfectly independent of the other, that whatever changes might take place in the life of either, the other would have no right to blame or to condemn."

"I wished to leave you perfectly free."

"And so I am," she broke in, eagerly, "more so than I ever was before. I could not bear to think of this, but now it makes me so happy. May I tell papa?"

One moment Charles Eden hesitated. The happiness for which he had waited in hope and patience through the long blank months of separation, for which he would have waited in hope and patience for as many years, was now within his reach; he had but to put out his hand to grasp it, and yet he hesitated. For the happiness for which he had waited and prayed had not come to him unalloyed. During those months of separation, when he had kept so faithful a memory of her in his heart, she had wronged and doubted him, had harboured bitter, angry thoughts, that

must too often have turned to hatred and contempt. Thus the absence for which he had more than once consoled himself by thinking that though a season of trial it might yet prove useful for both, as a test of their mutual love and faith—had parted them more completely than he could ever have deemed possible—had for the time being robbed him even of her friendship, converting him from a lover into an enemy, the most cruel and unjust a woman can have, except a faithless husband—a faithless lover. Now that she had been convinced of his loyalty, she might well look penitent and fond. But the happiness of a lifetime is not to be grounded on the impression of the moment; therefore, though his heart yearned over her—his best, his all—though he never for a moment tried to hide from himself the comfort an open engagement with her would be; how the fact of having some one to share his hopes and fears, of having some life identified with his own, would give to that life, hitherto so lone and silent, all that was yet wanting to make it pleasant—he checked every warmer impulse, and answered gravely—

“I could not speak to your father of my hopes, without at the same time speaking of my prospects, and those I have are not such as I should care to speak about.”

“Mrs. Reeves told me——”

“I know; but favour is at all times capricious, and not to be reckoned upon—still less would I reckon upon the death of a brother minister—things must remain as they were, Jane—we must wait.”

"Well, if we must we must; but everything remains as it was—just as it was before——"

"You learnt to doubt me."

"No, not that," she answered, timidly, and feeling heartily ashamed of herself, "but as it was before the trouble came to part us. Will you write to me sometimes?"

Stephen wrote to Mildred; and why should she not be just as happy in her love? Was it not as good and beautiful—as much to be desired?

"Will you not write to me sometimes?"

Another sore temptation for our Curate; but he resisted it.

"A correspondence would entail a certain amount of secrecy and deception, to which I could never consent to subject you. If in God's good time our hopes are to be realized we shall be all the happier for this further trial of our patience and faith in each other."

"I could never doubt you again—never," Jane said, quite humbly, coming a step nearer to him, where he stood upon the hearthrug, and half putting out her hand, longing to have it taken and pressed—so beautiful and desirable a thing seemed now the love that she had so long schooled herself, poor child, to do without.

"Don't be angry with me, please don't. I'm so sorry—so glad—and oh! do please stay for tea," as she heard the Doctor's step in the hall. "I couldn't bear for you to go away—and—and—I shall be back directly."

With this rather confused speech—which tumbled out, heaven alone knows how, for she

was in an awful hurry to get away and hide herself just for a few minutes before returning to preside in maidenly dignity at the tea-table—she made her escape.

Charles Eden did his little lady-love the very particular favour of staying to tea, and very grateful and happy she was—waiting upon him, and smiling upon him, and making love to him in such a pretty, womanly way, that he more than once regretted his late severity. When they parted, which they only did at the garden-gate, the tremulous fervour of his good-bye, and the lover-like pressure of his hand, left nothing for heart to desire.

“And I doubted him! I was foolish and wicked enough to doubt him!” said happy Jane, as she stood at the gate, peeping at him from behind the shrubbery. “It was really very, very wrong, but I’ll never do it again—never!”

And never having any temptation to do so, we may safely assure the reader that she never did.

CHAPTER XXIII.



AN autumn day, not only by the calendar, but real autumn weather. Not indeed one of our proverbial autumn days, when Englishmen are supposed to make away with themselves for want of some better means of getting rid of the next twenty-four hours, but a day all cloud and storm, and passion, angry, pitiless, glorious. Sweeping storm clouds in the sky, sweeping storm wind over the earth, rushing with a wanton shriek, half wail, half shout of triumph, through the shuddering tree tops, bending them forwards and downwards almost to the earth.

Darkness and the voice of tumult without ; and within, light and warmth, and the deep, pulseless silence that falls over a room where people sit, and are silent.

Mr. and Mrs. Hayes sit beside the parlour fire, and its ruddy blaze is the only light in the room ; for nurse Freeman has not yet brought in the lamp. She knows that the master has rather a liking for the twilight, or had when Miss Rhoda was there to sing to him, play to him, and chatter time and light away. Miss Rhoda is no longer there, but nothing is changed ; he would have nothing changed since she left.

So they sit beside the fire, and the red blaze leaping upward, wraps in its warm circle of light the man's bent figure, as he stoops towards it.

A year ago, husband and wife sat in the same room, in the dim twilight hour, even as now, as now, too, alone. But as, turning to the master, Mrs. Hayes repeated for the twentieth time—

“She'll be here to-morrow or next day, eh, dear?” and he nodded and smiled back an assent they did not feel so.

A year is, after all, a short time to effect any great change. Ten years will pass over a life leaving but few traces and no scars behind, and yet how awful a change will at times be wrought by a month, a day, an hour.

Many have been the changes wrought by the last year, as we already know, at Beddington, Badestone, and here too at Woollingford—in that one bent, crouching form at least. A year ago, looking after the ex-chemist, as he moved brisk and social among men, many, half his age, might have envied him the alert, upright figure that threescore years had left so erect in its unimpaired health and vigour; and have wondered how many more years of that sober life it would take to bend and weaken it. How many? One year has done it. The looks sent after him now are not those of envy, but of pity.

A year ago Peter Hayes, the most popular man in the place, could scarce walk ten steps in his native town without being stopped by some hearty greeting—a shake of the hand, a tap on the shoulder, a slap on the back. All greeted

him warmly and eagerly, knowing that he delighted in being thus greeted ; and many a time had pretty Miss Rhoda, hanging on his arm, turned up her little disdainful nose at papa's vulgar acquaintances, wishing from the bottom of her vain, foolish heart that, like Lady Arabella and Georgiana, friends of the circulating library, she could pass them by with a condescending nod or freezing bow. Ah, well, even Rhoda might be satisfied now, for friends look after the spare shrunken form in silence, and with a grave shake of the head let him pass on his way. Not that he is less popular than he was, but it has come to be regarded as an acknowledged fact that the old man would fain be left to go on his way in peace, and undisturbed.

A year ago Peter Hayes, besides being the most popular, was also the most zealously active citizen of the town. Not a thing went on, a creditable thing at least, but he was the first to aid and encourage it. Every dog has its day ; so has every popular character. The ex-chemist's sun had risen and set ; his day was over. Gradually the places that for so many years had known him, knew him no more. He disappeared from the bench of magistrates, the lecture-room, the club, the various Christian societies, whose protector and supporter he had been, and no one asked him why, for his grief was sacred. Everywhere his seat was empty, and no one asked him to fill it ; but his old friends, as they looked at it, shook their heads anew, and said, with a sigh, that the worthy man was past work, " breaking fast,

would never hold up his head again!" It was whispered, too, that the clear, strong mind to which so many had turned for help and advice, was no longer what it had been, that when addressed his answers were vague, and not always to the point; and his look, when fairly arrested, feeble and vacant.

A year ago we should have indignantly refuted the charge conveyed in the gossip's whisper; but now, as we turn from it to that crouching, motionless form, we can but shake our heads with the rest.

One year to work so great a change!

"The master's not been himself since the day—since Rhoda's marriage—has he now?" whispers good Mrs. Randolph to her friend, in an awe-struck whisper.

"No, he has fretted dreadfully, I'm sure he has, though he says so little; but that's his way," sighs Mrs. Hayes, in answer; but her whole face brightens at the very mention of his name. To her he is still, as ever, the noblest, strongest, wisest, best of men. Love such as that can see no change, and the very thought of him has comfort in it.

She, too, has changed; she, too, has fretted; but then she has him to turn to, and never has she turned in vain. If he cannot comfort his own darkened soul he can comfort hers. She tells him all her troubles, her doubts and fears, and he answers to them, as he would have done a year ago, when his mind was so clear and strong that many turned to it for aid. She is haunted at times by weak, super-

stitious terrors that he alone knows how to calm. She tells him of some ill-omened dream, and he answers her gently but solemnly, "The Lord's hand is heavy on us and on our house, wife, but He wouldn't frighten you with dreams, knowing that you've trouble enough without that; and, as for the child, if she's lost to us, He knows where to find her, and He'll not desert her whilst—we pray for her." And saying this the man sighs, and the woman is comforted.

So the weaker leans on the stronger; and he whom the young and happy look after with pity, not unmixed, it may be, with contempt, is looked up to with faith and reverence by the one who is weaker still than he. Having him, she cannot feel alone; loving him, she cannot feel despair.

The storm has been abroad all day with a wild tumult of sound. An hour ago there was a lull, and the rain fell softly but heavily, as fall the welcome tears after a fierce storm of grief or passion. But the rain has ceased now, the storm rages once more, and darkness closing over the scene, makes it more wild, more dreary yet.

Sheltered from the storm, in the bright circle of light, the old people sit beside the fire. The man's eyes, drooping and half closed, are fixed upon the blaze, to which the trembling, wrinkled hands are outstretched; the woman's eyes are, as usual, fixed upon him. Where would they turn if he were lost to them? Perhaps they would turn blind, or close for ever; I have heard of such things.

A loud squall, a beating sound against the window, as of one trying to get in. Both start and glance towards it; Mrs. Hayes utters an exclamation, her husband shivers slightly, and stoops to replace a fallen cinder.

Mrs. Hayes feels very nervous and frightened; she always does in a storm. She looks upon it as a direct judgment from on high, and direct judgments are certainly not pleasant things. They make one feel nervous and unsafe, as she does now. Mrs. Hayes never could bear a storm; but the time was, and not so very long ago either, when the ex-chemist would look out upon it with admiration, and even a certain solemn pleasure. How grand a thing it was—how strange and awe-inspiring! Terrible indeed in its very grandeur; but with the old woman and Rhoda safe at his side, sheltered from that as from every other blast of fate, what had he to fear? It was sad indeed for those exposed to its fury—the seamen, the wanderer, the homeless; but he could not think of them without at the same time thinking of the hospitals, the almshouses, the refuges, that his money and influence had helped to build; and a warm glow of love and gratitude filling his heart, left no place for dark or gloomy thoughts. “God sends the storm, and in all that He sends there is the element of goodness and beauty, if we would but open our eyes and hearts to see it.” So reasoned the philosopher and the Christian, then—and now?

Reason where you *can*; feel where you *must*.

The old woman is beside him still, safe and sheltered; but Rhoda, where is she? Does he ask himself this question now, as turning his head from time to time to listen, he shrinks and shivers, and droops the white head lower still? The white head that the gossips say will never be raised again.

"What a storm!" Mrs. Hayes remarks at last; for the long silence, contrasting with the wild uproar without, is growing oppressive; as is also the nervousness that prevents her enjoying the forty winks she is accustomed to at this hour. "I fear there will be much damage done to-night. What an awful wind!"

An awful wind indeed; they hear it as it comes sweeping round the corner, rending whatever meets it on its way. They hear how the tortured branches creak and groan, and how the severed twigs and leaves are driven downwards to the earth, beating against the window-panes in their descent.

All this they hear, and the shriek of the train, which has just come in, and many another sound besides. Strange, that hearing all this so distinctly, they do not hear that other and nearer sound of advancing footsteps, approaching so slowly, but surely.

"I declare it makes one tremble to hear it. If only some poor creature doesn't chance to be out in it—eh, dear?"

He does not answer. Again he has bent his head to listen. A sound of agony is abroad; for the storm has caught the great tree in the

garden, and as it will not bend it must be broken. The roar of the blast, the wild swaying of the boughs as they toss and writhe, not downwards but upwards; then a wrench, a crash, the storm has conquered, and the broken bough falls to the earth. Then there is another lull, as if, momentarily awed by its own work of destruction, the spirit of the storm furled its wings and was silent. And through the silence the listening ear catches softer, fainter sounds. The rustle of the ever falling leaves, the rain-drops pattering against the glass, the distant barking of a watch-dog, the muffled roll of carriage-wheels along the high road.

Strange, that hearing all this, it does not at the same time catch the slow advance of those approaching footsteps, nearer and nearer. Along the road—the garden—up the steps; a pause at each, for the wind is rough and cruel. They are both listening—father and mother—yet they do not hear them.

“I can’t think, I’m sure, what makes me remember it now—my dream, dear, you know—but it was just such a storm as to-night, and I saw her come in, as distinct as I see you now. Poor dear old soul! and she’s been dead these thirty years, and never paid me a visit yet! They say, ‘Dream of the dead you’ll hear of the living’—and to dream of one’s grandmother too! Perhaps we shall soon be hearing from Rhoda? Eh, dear?”

“Maybe, wife.”

There is a ring at the street door, low and

uncertain. They hear it where they sit, but scarcely heed it. Some one out in the storm, exposed to its fury ! But there is a lull now, and their thoughts are gone after the wanderer, who is so far away that even their love cannot reach her. The master says that their prayers can, but perhaps he himself sometimes doubts it.

"It's now more than a month that we've heard nothing. I can't make it out, I'm sure, never to write a line, though she knows we're so anxious, and I told her you had been ill—and—and—she who was always so fond of you !"

"Hush, wife !"

He cannot bear to be reminded of the old love, or the old days ; that is all past and done with.

The street door has been opened ; the blast sweeps howling down the passage. What a night !—what a storm !

"I don't know what's come to me to-day ; but I feel so nervous, just as if—as if——" She fears to speak out her thought, but she fears yet more to keep it to herself. "As if something had happened to Rhoda, as if we should never see her again."

"Never see her again ?"

A faint echo of the mother's thought—nothing more. And as if in answer to it the door opens softly, and Rhoda stands on the threshold, silent and motionless and shadowy in the dim twilight as a phantom from the dead.

Mrs. Hayes has seen her ; but even in the

great sudden shock of surprise and joy her first thought is of him—the master. How could she realize a joy, however great, until shared with him? Now, as ever, he must be first—not she.

So she does not rush forward to clasp the poor wanderer to her mother's breast—to welcome her home, as we welcome the loved and lost; but she lays a hand lightly and tremblingly on the old man's arm, and forces her lips to the awed whisper—

“Rhoda, dear, she's here! She's come home!”

And when he sees that what the mother says is true, when looking up he sees Rhoda standing in the doorway, he rises to his feet and totters forward, his eyes fixed, his hands outstretched, as if groping for something amid the darkness. But he cannot reach her; the eyes fall too, the outstretched arms drop powerless to his side, the little strength left to him after so much of grief and struggle gives way, suddenly and completely. “Rhoda!”

The cry rings out sharp and wild as a cry for help, and it is responded to; for before the old man can fall to the ground he is caught in the strong young arms and supported against the breast, that, torn by so many stormy emotions, has at last, by their very force, been hushed to rest and quiet.

Not a word passes between them; not a word of pity, endearment, repentance, or pardon. But by-and-by, the face, so sadly changed that she could scarcely perhaps have recognised it, had

she met with it anywhere but in the old home, is lifted to hers.

"You have come home, Rhoda—to stay?"

"Yes, father, I have come home—to stay."

Quite satisfied, but scarcely as yet recovered from the first shock, and feeling still quite strange and dazed, he returns to his seat; and Rhoda, who has come from very far, and is weary, kneels down at his feet, and lays her face, still wet with the poor mother's passionate tears, upon his knee—the hand, now so thin and shaky, to which she had clung as the little helpless child, held tight to her bosom.

"And your husband, dear?" Mrs. Hayes asks at last, after a long silence; and she glances fearfully at the door, as if expecting some sudden and startling interruption. "Did you come alone? Is—he—here?"

Rhoda does not look up, but the father does, piteously, shrinkingly, every feature drawn as if with physical pain.

"My husband—he is dead! He was very good."

In that meek, reverent heart, that knew better than any other all the sorrow, shame, and wrong that buried life, Arden Graemes would still be as the martyr and the saint.

"He was very good," she repeats; "but he was best so—and I have come home."

As she says this, she sighs—a sigh of weariness, not grief; and the old man, though he catches her sigh, smiles too; for his mind is not as clear as it was, and the husband's

death has brought the little daughter home—to stay.

After this they sit very still, those two, as if nothing were left to them but to sit thus; her head against his knee, his head against her bosom. There are emotions too deep for words.

But Mrs. Hayes, good soul, can't keep quiet; she is crying and sobbing hysterically, and hovers about them, caressing now one, now the other. At last she finds work for the soft, yearning fingers, and is satisfied.

"Bless my soul! if the child isn't quite wet, I declare."

And Rhoda, with a thrill of utter weariness and content, feels the fond mother hands busy about her, removing the dripping bonnet and shawl, smoothing back from the still hidden face the damp heavy hair that has been nobody's care or pride since it ceased to be hers.

Nurse Freeman enters softly, and Rhoda, still kneeling there, motionless as one dead, hears how the familiar voices mingle and blend, as they speak lovingly and anxiously of her. To be the child once more, cared for, waited on, cooed over, when you have felt so old, so unloved, so forlorn! As if the tones of affection, so long unheard, were more than she could bear, Rhoda starts suddenly to her feet; and clasping both hands to her head, as if to shut out the long unfamiliar sounds, cries out wildly—

"Mother, mother!" then sinks forward at the woman's feet.

* * * *

The storm has been abroad all day, but it is over now—quite over. A few hours of intervening darkness, and the sun shines forth again; all nature revives, and seems to laugh at the storm—that is past. Will she be less beautiful to-morrow, when kissed by the sunlight, than she was this morning? Many will say that she is more beautiful for the storm that blew over her so roughly—so cool, so still, with something too of solemnity about her. Who will miss from the tree—so rich in boughs, so luxuriant of foliage—the one branch, the few leaves that are gone? The gardener shakes his head, and sets to work; and very soon every vestige of the damage done is swept out of the way. True philosophy of the life that is so short, to bend to its storms as they sweep around us, and then, the storm past, rise elastic as before, grateful for the life spared, and caring but little to remember how many fair and goodly blossoms are lost to us for ever. But I have also passed where the tree has been uprooted, or the noble trunk felled; only a ghastly stump is left above ground, to linger on, lifeless and unsightly, until the axe or the worm takes pity on it. But such cases are, after all, exceptional. Yes, thank God! The storm-felled tree, the broken heart, the ruined life, they are, after all, but exceptional cases.

It is many hours since the storm that swept over the ex-chemist's home passed away from it; it is many hours too since Rhoda crossed its threshold, and the old man, looking up from the fire, saw her standing in the doorway. The fire

is out now, the parlour empty. No wonder ; for it is night, and the Hayes are early people.

Mr. Randolph, returning home later than usual, is surprised to see a light flashing from an upper window, the window of the room that has so long stood dark, silent, and deserted. He does not know that Rhoda has come home, that in the pretty white bed where she dreamt so many foolish, wicked dreams, she now lies in a deep, dreamless sleep, which has already lasted some hours. And through all those hours Peter Hayes has sat beside her, his hand tight-clasped to her bosom. Not once has his gaze been removed from her face. It has not been lost to him so long that he should now lose sight of it, even for a moment.

At the foot of the bed sits Mrs. Hayes, who, too restless and agitated to remain long anywhere, comes stealing in from time to time, lingering awhile until the silence becomes too oppressive, then stealing away as noiselessly, to talk it all over with nurse Freeman. Poor mother ! she has wept much, but she feels better now. She has felt better ever since she got rid of the ugly bonnet and shawl, and the shabby, threadbare dress, that it nearly broke her heart to look upon ; since she combed out the long brown hair and plaited it round the young widow's head, as she used to do in the old days when the vain girl wished to look particularly nice ; since she put her on the dainty, embroidered nightgown, found just as she had left it, still smelling of the lavender sprigs

and dried rose-leaves ; and since, stooping over the pillow, she kissed her and bade her good-night, as she had done night after night for so many years, as she had not done for so many months. Soon, very soon after that kiss it was, that Rhoda fell into the heavy, dreamless sleep that has already lasted so many hours.

"And to think that we have got her safe home after all," Mrs. Hayes is observing, just as Frank Randolph, before turning the corner, looks back once more at the usually darkened window, now so strangely illumined. "Not as I once thought, but for good and all, as if she had never gone away."

"As if she had never gone away?"

Mrs. Hayes does not at once answer ; her eyes are fixed upon the sleeper's face. Does it strike her now, for the first time, how sad a contrast that worn, sallow face presents to the pretty brightness and freshness of all around ? When she next speaks it is more softly yet, and with a certain hesitation—

"Well, not just the same, perhaps. She was so happy then, you see ; and since that she's had much trouble, I fear, and that has changed her."

"Yes, I suppose it is the trouble that has changed her."

Not for a moment have the eyes, into which the dull, vacant look of which people speak has been gradually creeping, month by month, day by day, hour by hour, been removed from the still, white face that is so sadly changed ; and as

they gaze, the look that lies far down in their troubled depths deepens and intensifies. Not dull or vacant now, having found what they so long missed.

"She was never fit for such a life, brought up as she was ; but she'll soon be all right now that she's come back to us. It must be the moving from place to place that has tried her so."

The mother pauses, for Rhoda seems troubled in her sleep. She has half risen from the pillow, and is speaking with a suppressed but painful eagerness.


"Hush, dear ! No, no ! You are safe here, quite safe. Lie down again. No one will disturb you *here*." And almost convulsively she strains the hand she still holds to her bosom, as if to show that the place where the weary head may rest, and feel safe, is her faithful woman's breast.

"It is of her husband she is thinking," whispers Mrs. Hayes, half-frightened.

"My husband !" The great eyes have opened wild and wide. "My husband ! He is dead ! He was very good !"

Then she falls asleep again ; and so the night passes, the interval of darkness and silence that must elapse before returning sunlight be sent to repair the mischief done by the past day's storm. Storm and sunshine both alike sent by God, and in all that He sends "the elements of goodness and beauty, if we would but open our eyes and hearts to see it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

HE last chapter of a novel—the last chapter of a life—the close of the one even as of the other ; and we drop the book with a sigh of regret, weariness, or disappointment ; anyhow with feelings very different from those with which we opened it—all eagerness then, and expectation ! But the last page is reached ; we have toiled through the three volumes and closed them successively—youth, manhood, old age ; and criticising them calmly and dispassionately as we can only do when they lie behind us—things passed and done with, are we not too often tempted to say, “ Could we but have known the end from the beginning, the dull winding-up to so promising an opening, should we have cared to go thus far ? ”

Ah, reader ! It is thus we are evermore led on and on—and, believe me, there’s no use in looking back when the end is reached. The end of a novel, the end of a life,—if that end does not satisfy you, then look beyond the printed record of the closed life, and say, “ *There* lies the end, not *here*.” No, surely not ; only the beginning of that end, which lies far, far beyond our view. The book closed, we lay it upon the

shelf, even as we lay away, upon the shelf in the silent vault, the coffin that enshrines our dead. The book read out, the life lived out—both laid upon the shelf to be forgotten—and why? Because we have followed them both to the end? Oh fools, and blind!

When the young ladies of Beddington having been in a body to the parish church to see Mildred Graves married to Stephen MacCullan, watched her drive off, they felt very much as if her life were over, and they need talk and think about her no more; she having passed for ever out of the charmed circle to which they still belonged. But the wives and mothers sighed and said, "Poor child!—and God bless her!"—knowing that life might only then be said to have begun for her.

And so indeed it was; for what had her life been hitherto but a preparation for that which was to come? All her dreams, her longings, her boundless aspirations after the beautiful, the ideal, the real, now centred in that little corner of the earth she called her home.

That home was Woodford House, of course. It had been her mother's home, it was to be hers; John Graves would have it so, and who could say a word against it? Mildred, certainly not; so dearly she loved the old home—nor Stephen either, so dearly he loved her.

At Mildred's suggestion it had been proposed to Mrs. MacCullan, in all sincerity, that she too should make her home at Woodford; but the proposition had been met by an incredulous

uplifting of the eyebrows, and a smile of scorn, ineffable.

"My dear child," she said, speaking to Mildred, for she it was to whom had been deputed the task of winning her over—"my dear child, you seem determined to make a model menagerie of your father's house. Now, I quite believe that the proverbial 'happy family' do live in perfect amity together, and prove a lucrative speculation for the showman, but we good Christians are, alas! too often more intractable even than the wild beasts, and I don't think that kind of thing would answer here."

"Why not?—we shall be so happy all together, you and papa, and Stephen and Jane. You will find it so dull living all alone."

Frances MacCullan often said the very same thing to herself, with a sigh; she now scouted the idea with an easy laugh.

"I am too old for that, my dear; people at my age take naturally to solitude as the fittest preparation for the home we must all, sooner or later, inhabit alone."

"But Stephen; how can he ever do without you? How could I ever replace you in his home?" persisted Mildred in an awed whisper, opening her great eyes very wide.

"He has made his choice," came the sharp, half bitter answer.

"But I know so little; and you would help me to do right, and make him happy."

"Your love has taught you that, child; by it alone you make him happy."

And the borrowed smile died away in a low long sigh, not the first or the last heaved by the yearning mother heart.

Winter passed, and spring and summer too, but still Mrs. MacCullan stayed on in the pretty cottage the Doctor had found for her and her son on their first arrival at Beddington. Stayed on alone, for, as we have said, Stephen had married Mildred, and had gone to live at Woodford.

"Why don't you come and see us oftener, mother?" the young doctor would say, with his bright cheery smile. "Mildred would be so glad if you did."

Mildred always the first thought. Yes, of course—the young wife taking the mother's place—filling it up—how completely!

"Young people get on best when left alone, take my word for it. Should your wife ever need my help or advice, they are at her service; but as she has Jane and her father always at hand, I don't quite see how she ever could."

Stephen did not quite see it either; so he let the matter drop.

"Yes, young people get on much better when left alone," Mrs. MacCullan repeated to herself, to still the regretful cravings at her heart; and, acting up to her conviction, she troubled the young people but little in their home, always finding a hundred good excuses for staying away from it. And though Mildred looked very wistful, and at times a little troubled, she would not own, even to herself, that Stephen's mother might

be more kind and friendly to the little wife, who had no mother of her own to cling to.

For one whole year, and three months added thereto, Mrs. MacCullan kept aloof—and then? Well, then, Mildred had a baby, and the baby was a boy, and was christened Stephen, Mildred would have it so. Stephen himself voted for its being called John, after the Doctor; but Mildred, who was very wise and far-seeing now, though such a childish creature still in her looks and ways, put on a very resolute, matronly air, and said it should be called Stephen, and nothing else. And as it was her own dear little baby, her firstborn, she had the best right to it, and could surely call it as she pleased.

“But if I tell you that I’m jealous, and wont have another Stephen to share my prerogatives?”

Then Mildred, who knew that what was a joke now might be something more serious later, that her husband might one day be jealous, even of their baby-boy, put on a wifely look, sweet and grave, and winding her soft, feeble arms about the neck bent down to her pillow, repeated that it must be so, and told him why.

“It’s so good of you to think of dear papa, and I should have been very glad to have baby called by his name—the name mamma would have given her baby-boy had she ever had one; she always said he should be called John. And later perhaps God will give us another little son, and he shall have papa’s name; but not the first, dear—not just the first. Papa doesn’t want

that to make him happy. He has us, dear, you know. But our mother is all alone."

And the wistful eyes so full of a yearning pity filled brimful, as she hid them away on her husband's breast.

"I'm afraid it made her unhappy when you married me, and left her all alone. I did not think of this then, for all appeared so right and good and beautiful; but since—since I've had baby, I seem to understand some things so much better, and I think she wants a new interest to comfort her, and make up for your loss. That's why baby must be called Stephen."

And Stephen MacCullan, senior, having nothing to answer to all this, except that his wife was an angel, the child was called Stephen, and grandmamma was humbly entreated to be god-mother to her son's child and namesake.

From that day forth if grandmamma did not actually take up her residence at Woodford House, she might just as well have done so, for her home it certainly was, and she as certainly constituted one of the "happy family." If she had before found excellent excuses for staying away, she now found more excellent ones still for being there at all hours of the day, and not unfrequently of the night too.

That baby could possibly outlive the twenty-four hours, go through the natural process of washing, dressing, feeding, sleeping, not be tumbled down the two flights of stairs, or be dropped like a cinder under the grate—without her care and supervision, was an idea too mon-

strous ever to enter grandmamma's head. How could it possibly be? And it was really touching to see how the young mother ceded her rights to the elder woman, who needed comfort; how she would draw the babe away from her own breast to lay it on that of grandmamma; and how, when strong enough to get up, she would lie back among the pillows of her chair, the little hands tight clasped together, because longing, oh, so intensely, to have baby—Stephen's own dear little baby, who had his name, and was so like him—in her arms; yet smiling, well pleased to see it in those other arms, that, stern and unloving for her, had never once enfolded her in tenderness, and had even once been outstretched to curse.

Truly, if love had done much for Mildred Graves it was doing more, far more, for Mildred MacCullan. And so, with a new and all-absorbing interest granted to her heart, and the light of faith, which is the peace of God, upon her soul, Frances MacCullan was happy, happier perhaps than she had ever yet been through her already long and chequered life.

And so we leave all happy? Well, why not? Has not each in his turn suffered enough to make future happiness possible? Future! How shall we dare talk of that, or deal with aught but that which concerns the present? For the present, at least, the family at Woodford House are happy.

One thing only at times troubles the young doctor, and I will tell you what it is. The much

too good opinion his little wife has of him. Surely by this time, being already the mother of his child, she must have found out for herself that he is far, very far from perfection. That he can be jealous without cause, exacting, capricious, and stern, even to her. Why then will she never allow that he is, or could be, in fault? And when, the evil mood over, he gathers her to him with passionate fondness, and making a clean breast of his short-comings, one and all, accuses himself of every possible enormity—why is her answer always the same, with a deep sigh of content, and love ineffable? “Oh no, you are good—so good!” And then, being such a little creature, far too little to reach his face, unless he deign to stoop it towards her, she falls to kissing the hand that twice saved her life; or the sleeve of his coat, or whatever else her soft little lips can reach—in token of undying love and feudal reverence. So foolish she is and fond.

Now we cannot for a moment deny that it *is* a sore trial for any man to have a wife who persists in thinking too well of him. And, that this is by no means one of the trials most common among men, should, we are well aware, be a subject of deep and particular gratitude. Nevertheless, notwithstanding this one drawback to his perfect felicity, Stephen MacCullan does manage to be tolerably happy, and would not, I verily believe, change lots or wives with any living creature.

As Mildred herself once told us, or rather

him, how she would set about making her husband happy, we need not repeat it here. Kisses soft, and caresses; the cold hand warmed against her breast, the cold look warmed by the light of love in her own. Love, faithful and blind, conquering and disarming where naught else could. Yes, Mildred always said she would be a fond little wife to the man she loved, but she never said what a clever and useful little wife she would be at the same time: what a help to the hard-worked professional man, because she did not even herself know all that matrimony and maternity would do for her. And when he praises her she has the prettiest way of reflecting all the praise back upon himself.

“Why it was you who taught me all that, dear, you know, who gave me the wish to be useful. I owe it all to you. How should I ever have been fit to be your wife and baby’s mother if you had not taught me to do right? I’m so glad that I’m no longer as foolish and selfish as I was; and I’m so glad too that I nursed Mrs. Puffit’s baby, it’s such a help to me now that I’ve a baby of my own; and I’m much more courageous than I used to be, for now, if the poor little thing should once be ill”—her voice faltered, and her cheeks paled just a little at the dreadful prospect, but she would not give way, and went steadily on—“and babies are sometimes ill, dear, you know; grandmamma says so, particularly when teething—I don’t think I should be so *very* frightened if you were *close* by; and I would do all you told me, with-

out trembling so very much, or shutting my eyes, even if I had to hold him my own self, and—he cried. And now that I’ve so many to care for it seems so easy to be good and useful. I don’t mean only at home, but everywhere; for how could I ever see the strong, the old, or the little ones in trouble without thinking of you, papa, or baby? and helping them is just like helping one of you, which makes it so easy, dear, you know.”

And Stephen would laugh at all her pretty little speeches, shrug his shoulders, and wonder to himself what he could ever have done to deserve the dear little wife that the sea had brought him. And when, so eager for his praise, so grateful for it when bestowed, she would thank him meekly for his good opinion of her, he would laugh louder still, and appeal to grandmamma if, having made Mrs. Stephen MacCullan what she was, it was not the most natural thing in the world that he should be satisfied with his own work.

One person only gave Stephen no credit whatever for any improvement, any change. “Change, indeed! the child was just his little Mildred, and nothing more.” Nor would he have had her anything more.

He who said this was John Graves. To him, though a wife and mother, she was the child Mildred still, and always would be. That she now stayed quietly at home, looking after shirt buttons instead of birds and beetles, was the inevitable result of his having given her to a husband. That she gathered her child to her

bosom instead of the wild trailing blossoms torn from hedge and meadow was the mere natural instinct of maternity, very suggestive, very beautiful, but implying no change, no change whatever. And, looking at the little face that, held in his broad palm, as she bends over the big study chair, he draws close to his, he may indeed seem justified in his opinion, for anything more childishly bright, fair, and rosy cannot be imagined.

And yet there is a change even there, though he cannot see it. The full soft lips, hushed to rest beneath the husband's kisses, have ceased their tremulous quivering and wayward wandering smiles, and the look of almost wild abstraction, seen only in those whose deeper feelings are given to dreams and longings, and which filled the girl's veiled shadowy eyes, lie no longer in those of the woman whose dreams are realized, and her longings satisfied. Only at times, when alone, quite alone with baby, holding him to her breast, instead of her old pets and playthings, the flowers—cooing to him, singing to him, or telling him in soft, low whispers, strange stories that none but baby must ever hear—the old wild light will return to her eyes, but the old strange wistfulness, never. Nor has the passionate look, once caught by Stephen, returned to them either. They meet his, calm and pure and fond, and he is content. Did he not say, "Let me but once see in them the answer to my love, and I shall be satisfied." He is so, perfectly.

"What a pretty childish creature Mrs. Stephen

MacCullan is !” This is the invariable remark of strangers ; which proves that matrimony has left her much what she was, outwardly at least. The real and the ideal being now united in her life, the eyes smile more, the lips less ; otherwise Mildred is unchanged.

And so will we leave her, and our readers too. What, without one parting look at poor little Jane, whom we have throughout, I fear, rather snubbed and neglected ; and why ? Because she is less interesting, less good, less worthy of notice than the spoilt bright-haired sister of whom so unnecessarily much has been said ?

The world’s greatest Philosopher and Moralist once told us, reader, that “ no man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other.”

And so it is. In our prejudice or partiality we make a hero of the one, a scapegoat of the other ; and for no better reason than that tastes differ, and we can’t help it.

Now, Jane has her admirers just as well as Mildred. She too has gained and kept the love of a noble heart, but of all this very little has been said, because the echo of the child Mildred’s voice is pleasant to our ear, because her shadowy eyes appeal to us for love and sympathy, and her smile, haunting us whilst we write, we are loth to leave her ; for the vanishing of a sweet familiar smile leaves darkness and a void behind. Now Jane, on the other hand, appeals to us by neither voice, look, nor smile ; her features are

snub, her manner brusque, and her true love is sandy-haired, and wears spectacles. If with an eloquent and impartial pen I could lay before you all the tender mysteries of her married life—for she did in time marry—all the beautiful and holy thoughts she has of the man she loves and the home he has found her, you would, I am sure, give her your warmest sympathy.

If, therefore, little interest has throughout been felt in you, poor ill-used, unassuming little Jane, the fault is not yours, but mine. Fortunately, you rank among the meek ones of the earth, who little care to have their names or their virtues blazoned forth, content to know them enshrined in the one heart, as are yours.

There, you have our last word at least; and so we close the book.

THE END.

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